

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

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North Institute Street, A Memoir

ON A STREET IN THE MOUNTAINS, a high school class of seventeen people squeezed into the dusty hollows of an old living room. The street was called North Institute, and it was loud that night.

The couch groaned, as did the floorboards as we danced to Frank Sinatra, and our spasms of laughter leaked out onto the porch and into the backyard where the dog's ears perked. We forgot our age during these nights, and by the time we remembered it, it no longer mattered.

Whenever the room hushed, we'd break into the places of our souls that cleft. We cupped the piping polish pottery, along with one another's burdens of adolescence. The sun sighed behind the peak and turned the room a shade of indigo that stained our faces and made my pupils swell with exhaustion. Bengal tea would inevitably slip from the bent of my fingers.

Once the company would dwindle to three, K- would rise from the chair beside me and touch the curve of my shoulder while I stirred. I vaguely remember him murmuring gratitude from the edges of our doorway while the rest piled out after him.

He knew the words to every Bob Dylan song, and it was always humming in his car amidst the faintest scent of Cuban cigars. He smoked them in the outback of the Rocky Mountains. He'd stand on his porch just to cradle whisky in one hand and Hemingway in the other, the cigar perched vicariously from the right side of his lips.

He told us once of how he preferred his cigars in the shower while Edith Piaf played from the bedroom. We gaped at his eccentricities and teased him about the ways he chose to live. But he loved words as I did, and his appetite for literature remained unparalleled, much to my admiration and annoyance. Together we spoke fondly of the ways books made us experience all the lives we'd never live, and we'd cast our lines of bait into the glacial streams of Colorado reflecting on all these things.

He turned eighteen before the rest of us, and when it was finally my turn, he took us rag-tag four to the ma and pa tobacco shop at the corner of Austin Bluffs. We slipped out onto the back porch one evening, and rested in the chilled metal of wrought iron chairs. The light cut into the edge of the horizon while I drew a tube of red lipstick from the back pocket of my jeans. K- chuckled like my grandfather would, his eyes lit by the flush of twilight.

And dearest M-, treasurer of the mundane, she reached across the table, threw her head back in laughter, gripped the open of my palm, and I chuckled too.

Her and I harbored a friendship that had stretched into years. We often sat with our legs crossed on the porch swing and considered how we might be stitched to a man one day the same way that thread cleaved scraps of cloth. We dreamed often of romance while shadows drew shapes across our thighs.

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One afternoon, at the start of the school year, we squeezed into the fourth row of a twelve passenger van, and ricocheted off the cracked cushions as the mountains blurred into desert. She smiled, her eyes beaming under the marble light, and I watched the dark strands of her hair slip the grip of her bun which capered from the open window. She had a way of sipping on life like it was an aged bottle of wine.

The day before our senior year we walked out onto the edge of a cliff, and kicked off our shoes in the heat while the eastern breeze gritted the tinted windows of her Ford.

"It's my place," she whispered, her eyes fixed on the valley. It was a groove in the shape of a half moon, and it looked fragile from our spit of rock. We sat on the soil in silence. It was easy for the majesty of the mountains to magnify our bias of beauty, but M- found equal glory in the ways the sun hit the sand and warmed it, how the fireweed bowed with breath, and slipped through the stretch of our fingers on lingering hikes. To her, glory was found in the shyest of places.

Even then, with the four of us doubled over from our howls of laughter, I glanced towards her, and she thought it too: these are the moments that can never be replicated, only recollected, and that somehow makes them radical.

S- quieted first, his dark hair eclipsed by the lamppost. His love for people was a fixed mark that time could never bleach. Whenever he spoke, we would all listen, because his words hung like rivers in the dry mountain air. He scaled mountains for the sake of rest, and climbed a mile of stairs every Saturday morning one summer. I liked to stand beside him on the summit just to memorize the slow rise of jasper, and tea rose and the ways it dressed the mid-morning dew. He was impossible to rush, and even then, on the outskirts of that run-of-a-mill tobacco shop, he spoke quietly into the lull of our laughter:

"I hope we never change."

And we hushed, us rag-tag four.

Distance dug ravines and we knew college had the capacity to calcify the mortar of these memories, till we'd full on forget the scent of carabiners on repels, when we'd hear the sizzle of seared metal and knew our hands would feel it soon. We climbed mountains six hours before the sun, hiked The Narrows in near-blazing heat, the blisters of our soles screaming, our souls swelling. We scrambled the face of canyons, the bludgeoning hail bruising our chafed backs as rain bellowed in our drums. We stuffed our chins deeper into the nylon of our bags, the mountain air thick with pine and forget-me-nots. The Rockies always had this ability to asphyxiate us, and we'd spend the evenings kicking up the dust of abandoned trails till we'd be arched at the hips, with our breath coming in gasps - and we'd laugh at our humanity. Change was the bane to which we refused to bend, but it was necessary, inevitable, though agonizing in its expectancy.

The final weeks of May beckoned our hearts to march the seven yards of our school's front lawn, a single row of chairs waiting at the front. I was

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the first to walk, the “C” in “Crighton” barely heard over the screaming whistle of my father. The wind blew hard that day, and I carefully walked the wooden platform, with my cream colored stilettos scuffing floorboards as J- held the rolled white parchment cradled by a red ribbon - the cradling of my ambitions. I hugged him, choking on the velocity of the words that I could never seem to say, like,

“Thank you.”

The school had felt like a forgotten, but exceedingly special corner of the world. Some weekends, we abandoned our textbooks and took education into the slot canyons of Utah. We slept beneath skies so stupendous in color they made us blush. When we walked along the fractures of earth at midnight, it was too dark to see the shadows of our palms in front of us. But we’d look up, and the stratosphere stretched across the breach in the gully we squeezed through. Shooting stars fired off into the horizon. One evening, S- lay beside me on the hard earth, and I heard him whisper that I should set my alarm for three in the morning. When I woke, the milky way bent across the pitch to paint the ground iridescent and I gasped.

On campus, we were tired of conventions and came to class shoeless. It eventually became a health code violation and J- made us pay five dollars for every time we forgot, but the loss was worth it. When the snow fell, there were bets to see how long one student could go wearing his flip flops. The soles of them were cratered from use, and it was the closest he could come to being barefoot. He lasted the whole winter, and when he sat beside me in Chemistry, sheltering his hands against the styrofoam cup of coffee, I knew his will was made of more steel than the purple grapes of his toes.

There were some winters we’d gather blankets and lay across the floor to discuss literature. At the first snowfall of our senior year, M- burst into Economics and grabbed my hand so that we might dance like mad on the AstroTurf. I came back to class with my hair damp at the neck and K- whispered the assignment I had missed so I could catch my breath.

In the summer we sat on the lawn and wrote essays while the mountains watched us from their gowns of bittercress. We practiced rappelling off the sides of the building and J- hosed us with water to replicate the waterfalls we’d descend when the leaves changed.

I knew the story of the building he’d purchased for a dollar. He planned to principal a school in an abandoned neighborhood of Old Colorado City. He ignored the raised eyebrow of his neighbors, and sunk his soul into a place that quickly burst at the seams from the sheer amount of students longing to experience the cross-stitching of adventure and academics. It was unique in the ways that it renovated our high school hearts, and showed us that there was more to life than a class system of hierarchical popularity - that make-up stuffed into pores, skin-tight, squeezed-in jeans, and deeper cut v’s to keep up with the vaporizing vanity of vogue, plastered in posts, was not the answer to a life lived well.

I traded hairspray for overhangs, sickening sweet perfume for the stink of embers, sanitized hands for the saturating stench of stagnant waters, gripping gory gossip for good conversation and I lived. But there weren’t

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enough words in the crushing cradle of time to tell him all these things, so I beamed through the choking of my gratitude. I like to think he understood.

I descended the steps of the platform, and saw the faces of my fierce and fragile friendships taking up the singular row of folding chairs. I thought of S-, and the lamppost, and his voice breaking into the beating bane of our inevitable change. I knew the moments I memorized were transitory, but even so, I would forever cleave to the sound of laughter leaking in living rooms, cigar smoke soaked seats, our fading facades falling with the sun, squeezed into hollows, on North Institute.