

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

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All I Knew About Melissa

Curtain rods hung from the ceiling of her place. Curtains sectioned off every room. She was a bit of an artist, part carpenter. She was a redhead. I would stop at nothing to have her.

The days grew longer that spring like they do every spring. I got used to the distances between home and work and school. The bicycle became my best friend.

I ate my meals alone. I breakfasted at home on oatmeal and fruit. I ate two lunches, one early and one late, both in the park. I ate elaborate dinners, mostly noodle based dishes.

Melissa talked about being a journalist, but even that seemed like a dated pursuit. She spent her Sunday mornings at the White Spot restaurant at 8th Ave and Broadway. There, after Eggs Benedict, she smoked cigarette after cigarette and read the newspaper.

In the high rise apartment building where I lived, I sat up late and read books, American literature and poetry written in Spanish. Once I got sleepy, I got into bed and dreaded any dreams.

It was a long layover from September to May. That was how I felt about Denver in those years. I took my life from the end of May to the end of August very seriously. It was mid-May when I finally met Melissa.

After spring exams, Melissa and I went to the nearest bar and drank beers. Later in my high rise apartment building, in my room, we did what I always hoped we'd do. She had never thought of me one way or the other. Parts of her tasted better than others.

I felt okay leaving Denver. I hitched a ride with someone. Out in the woods my domicile was a 9' x 9' tent. Everything I owned was within it. This canvas walled tent was not a permanent home, but I always wished it could be.

The clear nights when the moon was full were really as bright as day. In a sandy part of the trail leading up to camp, I made a zen garden in the moonlight.

It would take years, many, many years, after I left the military, after I left the Boy Scouts and after the Peace Corps extended me an invitation I ultimately had to refuse before my patriotic heart broke.

I had no incentive to return to Denver. I went to Portugal instead.

The late hours of the afternoon I spent with my camera. I'd run countless rolls of film through the machine. Some reason or other, the record of the Portuguese sky was deeper, wider, better than any picture I'd ever taken.

For whatever reason, nearing October, I retreated to Denver. That's when I met Tracy. Tracy had decided, after close to a decade of smoking nearly two packs of cigarettes a day that she would quit. She took up running. She began running marathons.

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I took up Tracy. Tracy took me to New Mexico where she ran miles and miles a day and I looked at monuments of dead Indians. The trip to Santa Fe was short, much like my time with Tracy.

Christmas came. I learned the merits of coffee and cigarettes. I tried calling Melissa. We'd have more in common now, coffee and cigarettes and all. I could even learn to read the newspapers. When her number was disconnected, I thought to call her friend Stoney.

Brad, he said. Stoney, I said. I'm glad you called, he said. You see, Melissa's gone. Gone? I asked, I had no idea. She's gone to Florida, Stoney said. Why? I asked. The phone line between us got suddenly very lonely. Well, Stoney said, she's pregnant. I was silent. I had to think about things. Here it was, the end of the year. I had slept with her in May. Oh, my, I said, who's is it? I had to ask and it was better than asking if it was mine. Her old boss, he said. How pregnant is she? I asked. Again, better than asking if it was mine. Few months, I guess, Stoney said, but listen, I got something here for you. You do? I asked. Come over here and get it, he said.

I took a job in a restaurant.

I left the restaurant job.

I got a job at a bank.

When I got my first paycheck from the bank, I bought a plane ticket. I would live in Mexico City by the first of February.

I went about it all wrong. I had, for no real reason, never reestablished life in Denver. I wanted that 9' x 9' tent again.

On a particularly cold Tuesday night, I walked over to Stoney's house. He handed me a glass of wine when I came in. Stoney was always good for it. He was good for wine. He was good for a laugh. He was a caregiver. He was sensitive.

Melissa had left a small Manila envelope with a book and some papers in it. The papers were poems, mostly, and things like letters, all addressed to me. I did not read them while drinking wine with Stoney. I accepted that he had read them all already anyway. He had been close to her. The book was a paperback she had loved which when she read it, it reminded her of me.

In Mexico City I plotted my future. I plotted it again and again. I read the book Melissa had given me. I reread it. I smoked a lot of cigarettes and I drank a lot of beer.

February passed.

March passed.

April passed.

May slowed down. The layover had ended. It had been a year. Something had to happen, already, because nothing had.