

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

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Pizza

My cousin has multiple sclerosis. He has a lot of other characteristics too, so I apologize. That's a bit like my saying: I have PTSD. As if that is my only quality. Both are true though.

We're sitting in the nearest booth to the door, so my cousin doesn't have to walk deep into the hallway-like pizzeria. We're in Hell. Hell, Michigan, but it's designed like they're pretending we're in New York, yet it's Chicago-style pizza.

How do I describe Hell?

It has a fun miniature golf course, which we only play in winter. It's more challenging then. It's the only putt-putt golf that's open when it's snowing.

I haven't seen my cousin in six years.

I say, "We're still alive."

He laughs, the sort of laugh where he feels socially obligated, as if it tires him a bit to do this.

We were both given life expectancies that ended last year or so, but we're still ticking. Him, from respiratory issues. Me, from suicide.

I can't commit suicide, because I'm indigenous. Not a hundred percent, which people constantly ask, but enough where I can't die that easily. The world has to work harder than that to kill me. If my ancestors survived, I will too.

"You're teaching," he says, no question to the question.

"Who told you that?"

"I thought you're teaching."

"No," I say. The conversation ends there. No follow-up question.

"You liking the store?"

"Sure," he says, "Did I show you the buck I killed?"

My ancestors were reindeer herders. My cousin isn't into the indigenous stuff at all, could care less that we're Sámi, Karelian.

He finds the phone-photo with him to the side, the deer's face center-stage, death in its eyes, as if it understands the humiliation of a camera capturing this. My mother is PETA, has passed that down to me through osmosis.

A customer leans over my cousin's shoulder. They're old friends.

They talk about killing deer for ten minutes. I let them go at it, sometimes nodding. They finish, a big wave goodbye to my cousin.

"Who's that?"

"Paul."

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"Paul who?"

"Paul who was on our baseball team, who hit a grand slam to get us to the semi-finals."

"It is?"

"Yeah."

"He looks different."

"You look different. I look different. The world looks different."

I say, "You want pepperoni? You want to get a pizza?"

"I ate."

"Oh."

"I'll have Blatz."

We order.

"You're not gonna have anything?"

"Just pizza."

Silence.

"You want to see the other buck I got?"

"No," I say.

He winces, like I just hit him with a BB gun.

"I'm about to eat," I say.

"So?"

"I don't want to look at corpses."

"You got pepperoni. Pork and beef. You're eating two animals in one."

"But I didn't kill them."

"That makes no sense."

"I just wanna talk with you. What've you been up to?"

"Hunting."

"Nothing else? Only hunting?"

"I work, but, I mean, you wanna hear about the grocery store? I know I don't want to talk about it, so, you know, that's an eight-point buck. That's not bad. That's trophy-class. Didn't you see how impressed Paul was?"

"Why didn't you introduce me?"

"Because you ignored him."

"I didn't know who he was."

"Because you've been away forever. You can't just leave your hometown and come back and expect everybody to know you. I'm here. This

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is where I live, so I get to be here." He gets up, comes back with another beer. They bring us the pizza.

"I'm in school," I say.

"Teaching."

"No, a student."

"Where?"

"U of M."

"Michigan?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Why am I in school?"

"We're no spring chickens."

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"You gonna go school forever?"

"I graduate next year, so, no, not forever."

"Can I have a piece?"

I slide the pizza over.

He eats. I look out the window. Across the street is a bar and next to it's another bar and next to that's another bar. They don't have windows. Just doors. Inside, it feels like you're in a dark warehouse storage room.

"U of M's top twenty-five in the world. And I'm on full scholarship, so that's why I'm going there."

"It seems excessive."

"To go to school?"

"No, *when* you're in school."

"Because I'm a corpse now or something?"

"Do what you do."

"OK, show me the other buck. Show me the other buck you killed."

"It's all right."

"If you're—if that's something you're proud of, show me."

"I can tell you don't care."

"I just like animals. It's hard to see a dead animal."

"You were in the military."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothing."

"What did you mean by that?"

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"The pizza's good."

"But what did you mean by that?"

"Look, we can talk about the grocery store."

"What did you mean about the military?"

"You're worried about me feeding my family? It's venison. And there's an overpopulation of deer in Michigan?"

"What's that have to do with the military?"

"Weren't you in Desert Storm?"

"I didn't kill anybody in the military."

I stare at his Ford baseball cap. As if there's a baseball team that has anything to do with Ford.

"You know Paul, who you just saw?" he says, "You know he just killed a guy?"

A waiter comes over and takes my cousin's empty beer cans.

"You OK I'm drinking?"

"What do you mean about Paul?"

"He was a cop. He shot and killed a guy. He's on leave now. They're looking into the case, investigating. He did it, because he had to, so nothing's gonna happen to him, but he just killed a guy. A husband. Shot him in the chest."

I stop eating. Outside, I see snow, for the first time this year, faint, a few flakes. It doesn't look beautiful. It looks like the same scene I'd viewed from this window for years. A repetition.

"That's horrible."

"It's his job."

"Still horrible."

"Do you think he is?"

"What?"

"Horrible."

"No, I mean, I don't know the details."

"I just told you. A domestic disturbance call. The guy was drunk. Hitting his wife. Paul went in with his partner. Told the guy to stop. Guy pulled out a gun and he told him to put it down and he didn't so he shot him. He wasn't playing. He's alive now. And a guy who was a wife-beater's dead."

I push the pizza away. My cousin eats.

The door opens. It's a cheerleader from high school. The only girl I ever sent a Valentine's to. Except she's with her children. They go to the back, where pickups are. I left my hometown because of this, how much shock there is to having entire histories flow through you with simple

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glances of people. I look at my cousin. There are days he can't walk. Just lies in bed. His wife brings him food. Then other days where he walks perfectly fine. He calls it "relapse and remission." Or "comes and goes." The symptoms disappear, for a while. I'm the same. Days where I feel I can do anything. Where I accomplish every task. Other days I can't get out of bed. The V.A. psychiatrist calls it "manic and depressive." Or "PTSD and bipolar."

"I'm not trying to depress you," my cousin says, switching tone. "You still having depression?"

I get aphasia sometimes, can't talk.

"You still writing?" he says, "I know you were writing."

"No."

"How come?"

"You have to work with non-indigenous editors."

"What does that mean?"

"They don't see story how natives see story."

"How so?"

"They just see story a different way. I went to an indigenous writing workshop and the leader of it said that. They don't want moments. They want *the* moment. Indigenous writing is quieter. They don't understand that."

"Who's they?"

"I don't know," I say.

I look at the pizza. It's amazing pizza. There's two slices left. I decide to eat no matter if I'm filled with stress hormones or not.

"Show me the goddamn deer," I say, and he does, happily.