

Shorts on a conference- Olympic Valley 2022

Zephyr Wind

After 8 hours of winding scenery, I am finally at my parent's apartment, sitting outside at the patio table with my father.

I haven't driven to Minden since I was in my early 20's. I usually hitch a ride up with my brother, since he's settled down my trips have been solo. Headed to my first writers conference, driving through untamed pockets of the 395 where people play chicken and "cell service" are just two words that don't belong in a sentence together.

An aging man, scattered over a lawn of small rocks. He lights a cigarette, with arms covered in light purple scabs that he never picks at. He hasn't had teeth since I was a teenager. He's lost weight since I saw him last, from being active and in his late 70's. Fishing, writing blogs, reading my silly stories and telling me they are great. Telling me to keep going. My brother says that I'm the favorite because I make things. I think I carry the family curse of words and drink. I'm just now figuring out what to do with it.

As my dad smokes we stare at one another across the table. I lean back and say out loud what I have been pondering since the Walker River curved around the roadway.

"Did you and mom want to have kids?" I ask.

He leans forward and sucks until his ember flares bright red. I wonder how many cigarettes I've watched my dad smoke. How many I've smoked. I don't reach across the table for the soft pack of 100's anymore. I haven't in over a decade.

"You were both planned. Luckily, we had health insurance both times."

I nod, and take a sip of the beer from the brewery in the shopping center next to their complex. Before I can respond a wind picks up, unnatural and surprising, like something is being delivered to me.

"The Zephyr Wind."

He explains.

"You get used to it. In the afternoon the wind picks up over Lake Tahoe and sweeps through the valley. Happens in the summer."

It comes again, this time as if from below me. It's trying to pick me up and deposit me someplace else. I put my arms out to see if it will lift me from my chair, away from the patio. We talk more about his journey to parenthood. I bring up my lack of initiative.

“I don’t think you’ll be getting grandkids.”

I tell him in a lull of quiet. He shrugs as if he knows something I don’t. The wind picks up again this time from above, pushing me back down into the rocks beneath the patio chair.

“You still have some time.” He says, while crushing his cherry out in the glass tray.

“That wind, it’s really something else.” I talk over the noise of leaves crashing into one another.

“Mark Twain wrote about it once. It blows in a reversal of the normal Sierra Nevada wind pattern.”

I grab my phone and Google it, read the quote I find slowly out loud: “He called it: ‘a peculiarly scriptural wind, in that no man knoweth ‘whence it cometh.’” I accentuate the antiquated language for effect.

My dad nods, and coughs into the wind. We talk more about my plans for getting into Tahoe. I decide to leave early and go through Reno to avoid any steep mountain passes. These roads make me sick, and my anxiety flares with the unknowable twists and turns.

“I should get going.” I tell him when the beer is finished.

I’m staying at the Carson Valley Inn, two minutes from their patio. We stand up and I follow him inside to say goodbye to my mother, busy with dishes. They stand next to one another smiling, seemingly shrunken yet lighter than I remember them from my childhood.

“I don’t know why you just don’t stay here.” My mom says.

“I’ll be back in the morning for coffee. I just need a real bed.” I assure her.

I leave out the fact that I’m nearly 40 years old and sleeping on the floor next to the tackle boxes and fishing poles in the spare bedroom left my hips bruised last time. My dad follows me to the parking lot. I hug him goodbye; he feels soft now in all the places that used to feel sturdy. I wave out the window behind me, disappearing back onto the 395.

Why Don't I Just Die?

I've had too much Rose. I'm buzzing. Electric.

I'm surrounded by writers, interesting, intelligent, outspoken, lively creators of story. Wordsmiths sitting at circular tables and making trips to the buffet for chicken thighs, spring mix, and risotto.

There's a bar here, where the wine is cheap, 5\$ a glass and the young men who pour it hit on everybody. They don't age, men like this never do. They carry their blond hair, and outdoorsy builds throughout the ages. A conveyor belt of anonymous trysts. Don't ask, don't tell.

One of the ladies from my workshop group plops her plate next to mine and sits.

"Anybody sitting here?"

"Nope. Well, you." I joke.

We laugh a little and she tells me about her life. Her husband who lives separately, a disabled son. She writes fiction about a bipolar Veteran in the 50's, and a family heirloom written for a lesbian lover that could never be. Her piece is up for critique tomorrow, I read it just before dinner. I wonder who she pines for. I don't think it's her husband.

"You should get an MFA." She tells me. "I went to the UCLA low residency program."

This only reminds me that I'm uneducated. I don't understand all these rules. She reminds me that I'm in debt, and higher education is broken, and I don't even know how I'm going to pay off the housing here despite getting a scholarship.

"I have too much debt already."

"Well, it's worth it."

"I can barely pay my rent."

"There's scholarships, fellowships too."

"I'm too old."

"Look at me." She motions towards her sixty-year-old chest.

I shove a fork of grill charred meat in my mouth and chew to avoid responding. She finishes,

"You should do it."

I watch her jam more spring mix into her mouth than can easily fit. We chew and listen to the ambient conversation. People meeting one another, people hoping that here they might find something. Information, an agent, cheap rose or vacation sex. I came to find out if my writing was worth anything, if there was a way to make it in this world. So far, I haven't liked the answers.

Pool Party

There is a small Irish pub in Olympic Valley. Friday afternoon is our free time, and we get drinks and dinner, brimming with gossip and residual endorphins. This whole trip I've been living on whiskey fumes, heavy sighs, and adaptation. I'm happy for the down time, to be just a human, and so is everybody else.

Some of the staff members are grouped together eating on the patio. My roommates and I take the half inside half outside table and waste no time ordering drinks.

For Nat a Cosmo. Lena gets something with Gin. I order a "Happy Meal," a can of Rainier with a shot of Jameson.

The staff seems interested in my roommate's work. Mine not so much, but I enjoy hearing about the doors that are opening for them, wondering what it might feel like to be sought out. What it might feel like to write something I felt confident about. Lena leans forward and says,

"I hear there's a pool party at Amy Tan's house today."

"Does she live up here? Or just have a rental?" Nat inquires.

Lena shrugs. I open my menu and can only think of thick hamburger patties on brioche buns. After pretending to look over my choices for a moment, I think aloud:

"I wonder if they all like each other. Like the staff members and all. Do you think they are having fun at the pool party?"

Nat wonders with me, "Probably, or at least they are cordial. You know they are stuck with one another. Small circles."

The waiter comes back, an English bloke who goes toe to toe with Nat for accent. She orders the curry; they find out they both know the same small town that has a similar one. It reminds them of home. Lena orders a burger; I do the same. Our drinks come shortly after. We cheers.

"To Amy Tan's pool party." I say.

We clink glasses, I take the full shot, followed by a short sip of pilsner and a deep breath of crisp mountain air. My nose has been bloody for days. I feel like I may be coming down with something. Between the lack of sleep, the crushing of the soul, and B.A.5 it's hard to know exactly what has a hold on me.

Boy in Workshop 6

I have a type.

Tall. Skinny. Tattoos. Full of pain. Addictive threads. Indie band T-shirts.

Of course, there's one in every bunch.

I don't claim that I'm not a sucker.

What's wrong with passing love anyways?

Longing. Observing another wounded deer. Hoping it recovers.

To know something is ridiculous and temporary.

To let it wash over you anyways.

To hear the voice of God through strangers you meet in a writing workshop.

(Feel it while you can kid...)

There's only so much mountain air.

So many people willing to write about

what it's like

to be so fragile.

He sits next to me. Rubs his face every ten minutes like clockwork.

Wears childlike sunglasses with a splash of rainbow paint on the arms.

"Misogyny?"

He wonders aloud.

"Is my character participating in misogynistic violence?"

We all agree no, he's only trying on masks.

Every day he eats a peanut butter sandwich. Wheat bread. Bite by bite like it's the only thing keeping him alive through the hours. That and black coffee poured carefully into a thermos lid paired with American Spirit cigarettes.

"Meditation?" He says to the group one day.

"I don't say that it's too trendy. I prefer resting my eyes."

The boy in the group. The boy who thinks. The boy who writes things on his hand. One day the letters *S.T.A.Y.*, an acronym darkened over in black pen. The next day below it; *protect yourself.* He carries smooth sea stones and rubs them carefully. I rub my Carnelian bracelet in turn and wonder if his fiancé is the one that game him the rocks for grounding. Of course, there's a fiancé. There is always one of those too.

We would hate each other in reality. The tightrope of sobriety needs stability. I am not stable. Two negatives do not make positive. Yet I hover in his comments. Insights into a mind I wish to converge with. On the last day of workshop, he says;

“I’m a drunk and I’m a man and I don’t trust either of those. My mind naturally goes to the darkest place.”

In my heart of hearts, I meet him there.