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The Danger is Hardly Greater

Martin was a beanpole who wore his blond hair below his ears and had a thick moustache. He was not jokey like some of the others, but serious and controlled, which made me feel nervous. The inside of his small pickup was uncluttered. He’d hung the dress-up shirt for his intended night out in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, on my side of the cab. As we drove out of Rock Springs toward Pinedale on Highway 191, I was anxious about messing up his truck, and that no doubt led to the shaky hand that toppled my soda onto that nice shirt, causing him to curse and pull the truck off the road.

He got out, shook the liquid from the shirt, and wiped it down with water he had in a bottle in the back of the pickup. The shirt was cowboy style, with yokes in front and back and pearly snaps on the pockets and cuffs. I was not used to being around men who cared about their wardrobes, and the shirt seemed sissy to me, as did his fussiness about the spilled drink. Still, I was sorry, and I apologized.

“It’s all right,” he said, avoiding eye contact in a way that told me it wasn’t.

After that, I thought it was better if I didn’t say anything. We rode in silence as the two-lane took us out of the treeless desert and farther from I-84 with its stink of exhaust, into the terrain that rose up around us until finally there was a greening of trees and brush, a marching of evergreens down from the slopes toward the road, a ruggedness dominated by boulders and serrated mountaintops. I forgot about Martin’s disapproval, and watched antelope appear and disappear in small herds, marveled at the ribbon of blue river next to the highway. Finally we reached a high mountain lake where Martin dropped me off at the trailhead with scarcely a goodbye. I wondered if he’d keep his promise to pick me up there the next day.

I was eighteen, far from my home in Virginia Beach, Virginia, following my ambition and desire for independence in my first summer job with the federal government. I’d been hired as the fire dispatcher for the Bureau of Land Management in Rock Springs. In the BLM yard, two shabby trailers sat up on blocks in the backyard of the office at the edge of town. These were essentially bunkhouses, though less stable than real structures might have been in the relentless wind. Surrounded by chalky dry buttes and hills at the edge of a treeless area along I-84 east of Rock
Springs, the trailers, outbuildings and office were enclosed by high chain link fences with barbed wire stretched across the top, as if we were in a prison compound.

Planning my summer in 1976, I’d looked at the map, noticed Rock Springs’ proximity to Jackson Hole, and remembered pictures of the Tetons. I’d imagined myself among the gorgeous toothy peaks looking down on the glittering Snake River in the wild valley. I’d had no idea Rock Springs was, in fact, barren and industrial, that its red light district had provided material for the news show “Sixty Minutes,” and that it was infamous in history for a massacre of Chinese coal miners by whites in 1885, a race riot that prompted a New York Times writer to say, “The appropriate fate for a community of this kind would be that of Sodom and Gomorrah.”

To me—a sheltered, upper middle class, still-virginal girl who prayed every day and read the Bible—Rock Springs did seem like a Sodom and Gomorrah. When I drove into town in a government car to collect the mail every day, I crossed the railroad tracks into a seedy district where, though I did not then know the history, I would not have been surprised by reports of prostitution and gambling and drugs. I felt endangered and was glad to find letters for myself everyday in that P.O. box—lifelines from home and from a boyfriend in Virginia who was a steady communicator.

Every day, wind rocked the trailer where I lived, and one night, I heard the men on the other side of my closed door discussing what they’d like to do with me. “I just want to cop a feel,” said one. I sat on the mattress, arms tight around my belly as if to protect myself, then remembered that because my father had called—insistent as ever from 2,500 miles away—our mutual employer had made my trailer mates install a lock on my door. I’d been embarrassed, but now I was glad for the hardware. I tiptoed to my bedroom door and turned the lock. Still I lay awake on my one article of furniture—the mattress on the floor—knowing it would not be a difficult lock to force.

Between the disappointing landscape, the banality of my job and the threats to my safety, despite my new income and the lock on my door, I wanted out. At the BLM office, looking at the maps, I concocted the idea of a solo backpack trip in the mountains 100 miles distant. I’d convinced my co-worker Martin, one of the older men who seemed relatively benign, whose shirt I’d now soiled with my drink, to give me a ride.

After he dropped me at the trailhead, I hiked a couple of miles in, and stood on a bluff overlooking another pristine mountain lake. Two men in cowboy hats were packing up their fishing gear, heading along the trail toward what looked to me like a good campsite. When they got close enough, one of them said, “You better turn around before that storm hits.”

“T’ll be spending the night.”

The two men glanced at each other uneasily. “Got a good tent?”

“A tarp.” I didn’t tell them I’d never set it up before, but my inexperience must have been obvious.

The shorter one put down his fishing rod. “We’ll put it up for you.”
I pulled the tarp out of my backpack. The men took over, and I stepped back in a way that had become usual for me. Men always seemed to know better. I always stepped back. My father’s lock on the trailer door was a case in point. They tied the tarp to a tree in a sideways V, with a log on top to hold the bottom of the V in place, so that I could both lie down on the tarp and use it as a roof.

“That ought to hold in the wind,” said the shorter man before the two of them wished me luck and hurried off to get ahead of the storm. I barely had time for another fistful of Granola before the weather hit. Then, the only thing between the lashing rain and me was that layer of plastic. Beyond the blue roof, wind tossed the pine branches overhead, and the rain came down in liquid spikes. I lay beneath my tarp praying and singing, as the water gathered in sagging pockets just above my chest. The air crackled with electricity; and thunder warned with close, violent explosions that lightning might solder earth to sky. I did not know then how commonly lightning ignites Western forests, and have since heard of people being electrocuted when they slept in puddles of water inside their tents. The men had deliberately placed me under a tree that was lower than the others and less likely to attract lightning. I would not have known how to set up the tarp so expertly. Even so, the ceiling came down closer to my face with the weight of rain. My muscles knotted. I’d brought along a tape player, and I listened to an audio letter my Virginia boyfriend—a man I would marry too soon and divorce years later—had spoken into his own recorder at home. I played his voice over and over.

I was trapped again, this time in the doorless and unpeopled wilderness. No locks kept out the wind and rain. I thought of John Muir who clung like a bobolink on a reed 100 feet up in the branches of a tree on a ridge so he could experience a windstorm. He wrote, The slender tops fairly flapped and swished in the passionate torrent, bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round, tracing indescribable combinations of vertical and horizontal curves . . . For on such occasions Nature has always something rare to show us, and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof. Unlike Muir, I was not exhilarated, but wet, cold, and frightened. Whereas he had previously experienced wilderness on his own and knew the physics of the trees intimately enough to be sure of his own safety, I had no idea whether the pines under which I’d staked my tarp would hold or fall on me during the storm. Each explosion of thunder was so close it shook the ground, and the accompanying lightning lit my tiny nest with an electric fire that I feared would fry me.

In the morning, though, when I rolled out gratefully from under the wet tarp, the rain-washed scenery glittered in sunlight. The mountain opposite my camp—a granite face stippled white and dark with light and shadow, scree and boulders—reflected perfectly on the lake’s surface in the windless quiet. The heat on my face and shoulders felt as marvelous as a warming fire to a victim of hypothermia. I closed my eyes and turned my face up to the cloudless sky, still as a lizard on my boulder-seat near the lakeshore. Never before had I experienced such silence. It lulled me into a trance.

Hearing a splash, I startled awake to see a bull moose, not a hundred yards from my camp, plunge into the lake. It paddled to the opposite shore like a gigantic dog, head and antlers held high, climbed onto the gravelly bank, shook, and disappeared into the trees. Now I began to feel the sensations I’d come looking for. I had shed the layers of brick, wood, chain link, barbed wire that normally kept me at a distance. The moose had been given only to me—for there were no other
spectators—and I laughed out loud, raised my palms and said thank you, not because—as in a church—I had been told I should, but because I could not help myself.

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When I returned to the BLM trailer, my housemates expressed no interest in what I’d done. As usual, they went out to a bar and came home drunk; so once again I locked myself in the room with its single high window and lay on the mattress on the floor. Now I was not so much fearful, however, as resigned to waiting out the danger. To cheer myself, I spread out my newly-developed photographs of the lake where I’d camped. My backpack, still smelling of smoke, was propped against one wall. This was an era before the advent of self-timers or digital cameras, so there was nothing human in the photographs. Considering those images—pines sprung back to straight, conical shapes after the storm—I felt the wind, a constant in the treeless area around the BLM, rocking the trailer differently. It was an agent of change that, pressing against the metallic walls, didn’t find the same elastic quality of tree branches, but instead pounded the structure like waves on a shoreline, threatening to break it apart.

I got out my Wyoming map. I’d only experienced a fingernail’s width on the many inches of uninhabited terrain marked as Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management or National Park Service land in the state, and much of it was within 100 miles of my trailer. I imagined other lakeshores where I could be the only camper. More solo moments with moose and other wildlife, under my tarp, in the weather.

A few weeks and another camping trip later, in the wee hours of the morning before I was to fly back to Virginia, my trailer mates had thrown a party, and the tiny living room of our metallic home was crowded with beer-drinking BLM workers. The trailer began to rock, though there was no wind, and we all looked at each other in confusion, until we understood that one of the residents had taken a girl into his room, where he’d apparently begun to have sex with her in an athletic way that rocked the whole structure. My co-workers rolled their eyes, and a few of us went outside to escape the embarrassment.

In the yard, under the moon, I found Raymond, the heavy-lidded young man who’d wanted to cop a feel. By now Raymond had figured out that I was a good girl with a boyfriend back East, but even so, he stood too close, looking down—for he was a head taller—into my eyes. Now I noticed the soft black hair falling in thick waves to his shoulders, high cheekbones tapering toward a handsome chin, eyes that—in memory, at least, were green with thick, dark lashes, the irises glazed from beer and pot. Around us, the barbed wire kept the coyotes and criminals out—at least those who were not employed by the BLM. Broken glass, used condoms, tampons, toilet paper, and wrappers littered the dirt roads outside the BLM compound, where people rutted the soil with motorcycles and dirt bikes. I’d been advised not to walk alone out there, though I had, of course.

As I stood before Raymond at the end of that summer, no doors between us, I no longer cowered. Instead I kissed him—no, I didn’t just kiss him. It would be more accurate to say we made out. He tasted of marijuana, sweet and smoky.
“You’re really leaving tomorrow?” He looked at me with eyes that did not focus.

I nodded, then turned back to the trailer, understanding that he was too stoned to follow. The music had softened, and most of the partiers had dispersed. Sodom and Gomorrah or not, revelers got sleepy. I entered my tiny room, where I could see a sliver of moon out the high window. I did not lock the door. I lay on my mattress thinking of Muir swaying in the branches and drifted off to the sound of wind.
Author Notes

Lisa Norris’s book of stories, Toy Guns, won the 1999 Willa Cather Fiction Prize and was published by Helicon Nine Press. Most recently, her stories, essays and poems have been published in Fourth Genre (Fall 2007), Blueline XXXI, the South Dakota Review (Fall 2009), Segue (Fall 2007), Ascent (2010), and Smartish Pace (April 2010) as well as the anthology Kiss Tomorrow Hello: Notes from the Midlife Underground (Doubleday 2006). She is an assistant professor of English at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington.

About the Work

Memory inspired the essay, “The Danger is Hardly Greater,” written thirtysome years after the events it describes. I rearranged the piece more than once, looking for meaning and focus. Spilling the drink on Martin’s shirt—seemingly a minor event in memory—became a good way to dramatize character/situation. That became the story’s opening in some late draft (I don’t now recall how many drafts…many, I assure you).

I also struggled with the point of view, eventually deciding to stay closer to the 19-year-old Lisa than to the 50something self who was writing. Reproducing dialogue from so long ago of course required some invention. Many episodes from my “Rock Springs period” are left out, in order to maintain the essay’s focus. That’s always another tough decision to make—what to put in, what to leave out.

I think of myself first and foremost as a storyteller, so for me, both fiction and nonfiction writing are primarily joyful play with narrative. At its best, nonfiction gets me in touch with a wiser self who makes sense of her life in ways that sometimes surprise and delight the bumbler who’s doing the living.

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www.cwu.edu/~english/Faculty/norris.html

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ccat.sas.upenn.edu/xconnect/v3/i2/Word/ln1.shtml

www.mid.muohio.edu/segue/vol6.htm