

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

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DEBORAH

I was moving across the country from Brooklyn to Idaho accompanied by my close friend and emotionally necessary companion, Viva. We were toting all my possessions in the back of my evergreen Jeep Cherokee, called "Tinker Jade." It acted as a temporary shell, carrying my apartment "necessities," and my cat Mr. Grey. It had been two years of COVID-19 and two years of being in a long-distance relationship which prompted me to abandon New York and join my partner, Jack, in Moscow, Idaho. This was a huge leap for our relationship and a giant spatial leap for my native city-dweller self. I was excited and anxious about the merging of our belongings and selves. It was the first time I would be living with a partner, and I knew many challenges lay ahead. I'm an only child. I've always had the luxury of my personal space. I was eager for change yet deeply feared it.

Once we arrived in Idaho, the conclusion of our long drive across America, Viva and I opted to visit one of its favored natural hot springs—Jerry Johnson. From the parking lot off the Lochsa River, the springs are about a mile-and-a-half hike along Warm Springs Creek, through a lush coniferous forest filled with fallen beetle-killed trees and rich green ferns. A white prospector named Jerry Johnson built a cabin near the springs and therefore claimed them as his own. These hot springs had been used by humans and animals for thousands of years before Jerry's extremities graced their hot healing waters. Unsurprisingly Jerry's springs are clothing optional, but the only people I've seen taking advantage of it were boomer males.

The first pool we reached was filled with teenage girls who gave us a "Don't sit with us" look. One flipped her long blonde ponytail out of her face, pulling the hair from her glossed lips with her pink acrylic fingernails. Walking along the trail towards the other pools, I gazed down at the beetle kill markings, or 'galleries' as they're called, and tried to decipher the meaning of their snaking forms. The farthest spring, which overlooked a shimmering meadow, was bigger than the other pools, maybe 10 feet, but it already contained a shoulder-to-shoulder assortment of bodies.

Viva and I walked to an open area, slowly peeled our layers off, and eased ourselves into the hot, turbid water. Viva in her signature high-cut black one-piece, "always a high cut" was her motto. Tucked into a corner near a large rock face, I tried to relax my limbs into the loose silt. I sifted a handful of mica sparkling sediment through my fingers like a prospector searching for gold.

Now we were eight in a tub, commingling tissues and fluids. To my left a mother and daughter were deep in conversation, pretending no one was there to hear them. A Goth couple to my right were lathering their thin, pale bodies with sunblock that instantly came off in an oily pool around them in the still water. There was a tattooed couple from Arizona with deep leathery tans. A handsome older man sat at the water's edge. His striking white beard and hair made him look like a hot Gandalf.

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Five minutes passed and two more eager individuals walked up and awkwardly stripped down to their swimwear, increasing the spring occupancy to 10— an uncomfortable capacity. The newcomer was a middle-aged man with a black bucket hat, thick brown mustache, and black tactical Crocs (the same Crocs my partner had just purchased as his summer staple). I had to do a double-take because he looked just like my Uncle Darrell. My uncle had the same jovial eyes, a thick brown mustache, with rounded cheeks, and a round reddish nose.

The woman who was with him smiled in our direction, clocking us as her go-to targets when our eyes met briefly. She had long white hair and a bright pink bikini which revealed her tanned, naturally aging skin. A young and zestful energy exuded from her being as she sloshed over, a bit too close to Viva and me. She leaned in to introduce herself and tell us about the man with the bucket hat. She said she was traveling with him because he just lost his wife. I noticed the white whiskers on her upper lip and chin, she was very attractive. The woman had met her traveling companion and his now-deceased wife in high school. She felt sorry for him, so she decided to keep him company on this trip. Together they were visiting all the spots that he and his dead wife, Deborah, loved. I thought maybe she joined him to make a move once the time was appropriate and he had finished grieving Deborah.

At that moment the man stood up and slowly waded to the center of the ten-foot pool. All eyes were on him as he began to speak to the group, “Hi I’m Richard and I hope you all are doing well today?” He paused, some of the soakers nodded, and responded with a “Hi Richard.” “I wanted to see,” he continued, “if y’all can take a moment and join me in a short ceremony to honor the memory of my departed wife Deborah. She and I used to come here often and we remembered it fondly. Would it be ok if we took a minute to toast to her memory?” All of us passed nervous glances as we nodded in reassurance and in unison agreed to a toast of acknowledgement to Deborah.

The woman in the pink bikini kept whispering to Viva. “Yeah, I can’t wait for this to be over. He’s nice and all but I like to be alone. I mean, I’ve hardly ever had a relationship. Men are so annoying.” From the center of the small pool, Richard continued. I couldn’t make out his words, distracted by the woman in the pink bikini’s voice tickling my eardrums. I saw the man proceed to take out a piece of tightly wrapped tinfoil. At first, I thought: drugs. The man took a pinch of something from the foil and began to sprinkle it into the hot, still water. “And so I hope you can all raise your drinks to Deborah.” With this, the group raised their thermoses and chimed in unison, “To Deborah.” I watched Deborah gather at the surface and float there effortlessly, unmoving. As Richard turned and abruptly walked back to take his seat on the edge of the pool, Deborah was pushed by his wake in my direction. I looked up to see if anyone was watching, but to my surprise everyone had turned their attention back to their original conversations, oblivious to Deborah. My gaze fixed itself on Deborah as she clung to the water’s surface, still and grey, slowly inching towards me. I retracted my legs to my chest and secretly stuck my index finger into Deborah and swiftly stirred her, like mixing cocoa powder into hot milk. Anxious for her to merge with the elements, to disappear.