

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

Danyl A Doyle
Too Poor To Party

Devyn's mother dropped him off at Ingersoll Hall at Colorado State University in Fort Collins in the fall of 1969. He panicked. Six hours and 350 miles from his girlfriend, he couldn't sneak over to see Stormy. He was afraid she'd end up with someone else while he was gone. "Take me home, I don't wanna go here. Take me to Mesa College, please, Mom, I can't go here."

"You have to stay. You have a scholarship here, and we can't pay your tuition at Mesa. If you don't go to college, you'll end up in Vietnam and for sure, you won't see Stormy."

Cultural shock. Braless girls sat next to him in class. He had trouble concentrating on the lectures. Guys teased him, "Where's your accent from? Why do you wear cowboy boots? Are you a hick? The other freshmen had hot cars and designer clothes. He walked across campus in cowboy boots and JC-Penny blue jeans.

Other guys hit the bars but he didn't have enough money to buy one beer. They went to shows, concerts, and parties. Devyn was poor to the point of shabby. "Yep, I'm just a country hick."

Someone asked if he was gay since everybody was having sex while he studied. Had to. Cedaredge High hadn't prepared him for this. The professors graded on a strict bell curve. His smile faded. Extremely lonely, he sent Stormy a song, "I'd wait a million years. Walk a million miles, cry a million tears for you."

This husky black dude walked in, tossed a big duffle bag on the empty single bed in Dev's room, and put his hand out. "Hi, I'm your roommate. Name's Harley. What's yours?"

From North High in Denver, Harley had walked on the CSU football team. The guy did pushups on his fingertips; his muscled body was chiseled out of black marble. He transferred to Ingersoll Hall because it was across from Moby Gym and the practice fields. He was also on an equal opportunity grant. "A football ride would make all the difference."

Devyn was a poor white farm boy and Harley was a poor black ghetto kid. No movies, rock concerts, or taking girls out – neither had money or a car. But Harley was a stud athlete and the girls were all over him while Devyn was a farm boy from Cedarberry.

His classes were in huge lecture halls with four hundred students – the professors a tiny dot near the podium. Thinking of getting done in three instead of four years, he signed up for eighteen hours. His underwear, socks, and T-shirts came out pink in the laundry. The guys in gym class saw it and called him a gay wad. His papers came back, "Good ideas, style poor C-." His rural high school education sucked compared to other students and he had to work his ass off. Part of his financial aid was work-study, so he worked twenty hours a week, showing films for the audiovisual department.

One night Devyn asked Harley, "So, as a nigger, do you experience prejudice?"

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Harley looked like he'd smack him. "Don't use that word, man – it's offensive."

"That's a bad word? Sorry man, where I grew up, there are only Mexicans and whites. Everyone calls blacks niggers. You're my first nigger friend."

"There you go again, say black. Nigger is the worst racial slur you could call me."

His face hot, Devyn stuttered, "I...I thought it was short for Negro."

Harley's expression softened. "You're going to get a real education over here, aren't you?"

Harley was cool and introduced him to his cousin, Bianca, who lived in the girl's wing of Ingersoll Hall. She was gorgeous with muscular legs that coalesced in a bubble butt that looked like two cats wrestling in a gunny sack as she walked. Every guy in the cafeteria stared when she left. Funny and bright, she planned to be a veterinarian.

They started eating together in the dorm cafeteria. He told Bianca about growing up on a farm and his girlfriend whom he hoped would wait. Her mother was a strict Mormon who had demanded that he attend their church to see Stormy. Girls were expected to marry a returned missionary and he worried she might start dating one.

Bianca said, "You need to move on. You're too young to get married. This is the time to explore and figure yourself out."

"I know." He thought for a moment. "Guess that's why I'm interested in you."

She saw him staring at her arm. "Are you looking at my skin color?"

His face felt hot. "Yes, it's interesting. I was thinking you're not black, you're brown."

"Haven't you been around blacks before?"

"No." He shyly asked, "Can I hold your hand? I think the contrast would look beautiful."

Bianca smiled and took his hand.

They sat looking at their fingers locked together.

She said, "It is beautiful. I hadn't thought of it that way."

He nodded his head. "Looks like a sensitive black and white photograph."

Other students stared at them. Some smiled while others looked disgusted or angry.

She said, "Actually, there is no such thing as race. We're not separate species that can't interbreed. Race is a construct to justify enslaving black Africans and is a means to scapegoat us."

"We ought to try and change it." He caught her brown eyes.

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She grinned. "We should walk around campus holding hands with you in black and me in white."

"That would be fun."

As he left, two big black guys came up to him. "Hey, what you doing with one of our girls?"

"Just getting to know her. My roommate, Harley, introduced us. She's his cousin."

"You're a friend of Harley's?"

"Yeah, like I said, he's my roommate. We're getting to be good friends."

They looked confused, then shrugged and left.

Despite the attention she got from the black dudes, Bianca was interested in helping Devyn lose all vestige of his prejudice. If he hadn't given his heart to Stormy, no doubt, they would have been an item. They talked about the Vietnam War, inequality, and racism. She pointed out, "James Baldwin said, 'Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.'"

Devyn said, "I'm committed to ending the war and racism if you'll help me."

In a burst of emotion, they hugged. Everyone in the lunchroom stared. It was uncomfortable but they were emboldened. To spite them, they stood, then hugged and kissed. A couple of big black athletes stood but Harley calmed them down.

For fun, some days she dressed in a white pantsuit while Devyn wore black jeans and a black T-shirt, and then they walked around campus together. An urban black fox walking arm in arm with a blue-eyed blonde cowboy. People stared. They often hugged and kissed to shock them. She joked, "My roomie and I think you'd make a great Oriole cookie."

Made his imagination run wild.

Stormy was right to be afraid of him going off to college, but the only money he spent was to call her for three minutes, once a week. She didn't say much because her mother monitored her phone calls. He did all the talking. Something was wrong.

Devyn had to drop a class. He didn't need to study in high school but at CSU, he spent hours outlining textbooks and typing notes. The other students drank beer, played Frisbee, and screwed their brains out. His social life was eating with Harley and Bianca in the dorm cafeteria. She was cool and didn't expect him to take her out since she knew he didn't have any money. Like him, she had grown up poor. "We'll have fun just hanging out and talking and..." she winked.

Devyn was falling for her and knew she wanted him to. They looked into each other's eyes as they talked about national issues.

On October 15, the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam held a massive demonstration across the whole nation against United States involvement. Everyone but a few rednecks wore black armbands. Professors said if students wanted to protest, they wouldn't hold it against their grades.

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A lot of students stopped going to classes. At the rallies, he and Bianca sang protest songs and listened to speeches. A student told him that he shouldn't be there because he wore cowboy boots. "Hey, just 'cause I grew up on a farm doesn't make me pro-war."

Abbie Hoffman came to speak. He ranted against the Vietnam War and the establishment, calling it corrupt. "They're all pigs! We should burn the government down!"

A coed asked him what women could do to support men who resisted the draft.

He said, "Say yes to men who say no."

Guys scanned the room for that type of girl.

A big man with short-cropped hair stood up. "You are anti-American and we should support the troops."

He got booed by the crowd.

Probably a returned Vietnam vet, Dev figured.

Some guys burned their draft cards. He wouldn't get his for a couple of more weeks or he might have gotten caught up in the enthusiasm and burned it. He wandered arm in arm with Bianca back to the dorms, trying to sort it out. It was all confusing.

He and Bianca talked about Senator Edward Kennedy who had called for combat troops to be withdrawn from Vietnam by October next year and for all U.S. forces to be withdrawn by the end of 1972. President Nixon ignored the thousands who marched. Peace activists congregated outside U.S. embassies across Europe. Protests shut down governments. It was a world movement. "We're going to end the Vietnam War!"

Bianca wished this kind of energy was also going into ending racism. Devyn agreed. When they held hands in the cafeteria he got cold stares from white girls and she got the same from black guys. "Just ignore them," Bianca said. "We're confronting institutionalized racism with direct action."

Devyn thought it was the greatest thing he had ever done. "Martin Luther King Junior said, 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.'"

"I know. Have you ever watched his 'I Have a Dream speech?' It's very inspiring."

"No, can we see it together?"

Stormy called for the first time, saying, "Mom ran off the road and we landed upside down in the river. I had to go to the hospital because I hurt my neck and back."

His heart jumped with anxiety. "Are you alright now?"

"I'm still sore, but I'll be okay."

"Dang, I wish I could see you."

"Can you come over? I miss you."

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Devyn was quiet for a moment. "I wish I could. I don't want to be here." He told her about the other students, their money, their coolness, and how he didn't fit in. "I don't have a car and I couldn't afford the gas even if I did."

She was silent, then said, "I lost your necklace in the accident. I'm sorry."

"You did?" He had given her a little diamond necklace just before he left. "Well, it only matters that you're safe."

"I have to hang up. Call when you can."

"I love you."

She didn't say it back.

The next time he walked Bianca to class, she said, "I like you, Devyn. Why don't you give up that young country girl and fall in love with me?"

He said, "She just called. She was in a car accident but she's okay."

"Have you had sex with her?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't just sex, we made love." He glanced at her deep brown eyes.

Bianca said, "We'd make love." There was something in her eyes. "You've been gone long enough, she's probably with somebody else by now."

Slowing the pace, he couldn't answer for a minute, wondering about Stormy and the returned missionary. "I don't think so. We were both virgins."

Bianca grabbed the crook of his arm and giggled. "Aren't you curious what it'd be like with me?" She took a quick breath. "This is the era of free love, no obligation."

"If we did, I know I'd fall in love with you."

"Are you scared to fall in love with me because I'm black?"

"No way. Your skin is beautiful. I keep staring with wonder when we're holding hands. It's a still life of the end of racism."

"So why not come to my dorm room some evening?"

He took short breaths. "I...I...promised her. I...I've got to keep my word."

"You're silly but honorable. Maybe that's why I like you so much." She touched his butt as he stepped off the curb.

Devyn stumbled and fell on his face.

She picked him up by an arm. "I can think of better places for you to fall."

"I'm late to class." He took off running.

That evening she said, "Our relationship would be a political statement if we genuinely loved each other."

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"Bianca, I'm all mixed up. I promised Stormy to be faithful. I love her and I like you more than a lot. I don't know how to handle this."

"To tell you the truth, my father would freak out if he knew I was seeing a white guy." Her eyebrows wrinkled with anxiety.

His mouth fell open. "I've been worrying because my family wouldn't accept you."

She shrugged. "We've committed to confront racism. Our children would be a beautiful blend of both of us."

He laughed.

"What's so funny?" Her tone was sharp.

"I just got an image of our baby's skin split down the middle, half white and half black." He saw her serious expression. "I'm sorry. I'm just afraid to love you."

She said, "Be brave. We are intellectually and physically matched. Your girl at home has problems and her mother hates you. It's simple."

He looked at her with fear and longing.

Harley invited him to a party with a live band. A couple of big guys came up to him, saying it was blacks only. Harley told them to back off because Devyn was his friend and then went dancing. Bianca waved at him to come in. They had a beer keg and the cover was five dollars. He didn't have any money so he couldn't go in. He felt like an idiot walking home, thinking of dancing with Bianca. "I'm a poor, stupid farm boy."

Harley was pissed when he came back to the dorm room. "You don't like partying with blacks?"

"No man, I didn't have the money to get in."

He didn't believe Devyn was that broke. "Bianca was hurt. Now she thinks you're prejudiced."

Devyn longed for a simpler time back home with Stormy when his heart wasn't split in two. He needed to cut one of them off.

Bianca ignored him after that. He tried to sit next to her in the lunchroom and she barred him. She said loudly, "I don't sit next to bigots."

His jaw dropped. Other students looked up. He dumped his tray in the trash and went to his dorm room. Harley stopped talking to him. He had never felt so alone. He was too poor, too poor to party.

After receiving his draft card, Devyn caught a ride home with another student from Cedaredge. Surprising his parents, he said, "I'm quitting college. I don't fit in there. I'll get a job at the sugar beet plant."

The old Marine said, "You can't stay here without a job. Once a man is eighteen, he's on his own. You've got three weeks then you'll have to pay for rent and food."

His dad worked at Holly Sugar and could get him on. To get a job at the sugar beet plant, you put on a hard hat, boots, and gloves, and rode the rail. In the center of the three-story building between floors was a

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landing with handrails overlooking the staircases. They ran three shifts so Devyn was there at the beginning of every shift, seven days a week. Foremen pulled a man off the rail to work in his area. They asked his name and when he said Devyn McDowell, they'd take someone else. He realized Dad had put the word out not to hire him. WTF? He thought Dad wanted him to fight in Vietnam. He got discouraged. It was the only job in Delta County this time of year. He didn't have the money to go to Mesa College in Grand Junction.

Stormy kept telling him to go back to CSU so he wouldn't get drafted. She had no idea the risk with Bianca there. Their limited times together were loving but anxious. They had to sneak around because he wasn't baptized. This becoming an adult business wasn't turning out to be much fun.

In San Francisco on November 15, 1969, one hundred fifty thousand people marched, and in Washington DC more than two hundred and fifty thousand demonstrated in a symbolic 'March Against Death.' They marched at CSU and Devyn wished he was there to participate with Bianca, but he was trying to get a job in Delta so he could keep his girlfriend.

Dad told Devyn he owed \$120 in rent and board if he wasn't back in college before Thanksgiving. Giving up, he left his darling alone with her wacky mother. As a consolation, his folks bought him a beat-up 1960 Chevy for \$150.00.

He told Harley he went home to find a job because he needed money.

Harley said, "Dude, if I had known you were so broke, I'd have paid for you to get into the party. We thought you didn't want to hang out with blacks." Harley had made the team so he was doing better.

Face hot, Devyn dropped his head. "No man, I think of you as my best friend here at CSU, and I like Bianca. She's smart and fun to be with and I'm almost in love with her. I'm just too poor to party."