

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

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The Great Circle Trail

Bill McIntyre walks into the Jo-Mary Checkpoint on a Tuesday morning the day before the summer solstice.

A woman sits behind a desk, looks up, but does not rise.

"I'd like to pay what I need to pay to camp, if I may?"

"Where ya goin'?"

"The Great Circle Trail."

"Never heard of it."

He explains the route. He pays his thirty-four dollars and another fifteen for a Great North Woods cap with a plaid bear above the bill. All is cordial.

He returns to his ten-year old Tacoma and drives the sixteen gravel miles to the trailhead parking lot. The only vehicle he passes is a logging truck he yields to with a mutual wave.

A green Caprice that's seen better days is in the small lot. Two men in their twenties, one capped, get out. As they do, the capped one pops the trunk.

"You guys hikin' The Great Circle Trail?" asks Bill as he gets out and puts his backpack on.

"No, sir," the uncapped one replies. "We're goin' fishin' up to Sing Sing Pond."

The capped one takes two rods and tackle boxes from the trunk. He nods and smiles at Bill.

Bill cinches straps on his pack and locks his truck.

"Good luck," he says, his walking stick in hand, as he heads for the trailhead across the Jo-Mary Road.

"You too," the uncapped man says. "Happy trails."

When Bill is gone, the capped man puts the rods and boxes back in the trunk and closes it. They look for a while in the direction of the trailhead, listen as the stick's metallic tip goes silent.

Nearby a tree frog sings.

"Well?" the uncapped man inquires.

The capped man half nods and says, "He'll do," as they return to the Caprice.

They turn left on the road and drive at no great speed in the direction opposite the checkpoint.



At dawn the next day, nine miles from the trailhead, Bill wakes in a lightweight tent beside Sixth Debsconeag Pond. He listens to the red squir-

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rels and the phoebes and the unknowns for a while. A flutter on the pond is last night's loon taking flight. Joint by joint, he starts to move. A stiff come back to life.

On his knees, he folds his sleeping bag one time and rolls it as compactly as he can. He double bags it, stows it in the bottom of his pack, and then deflates his sleeping pad. He folds it, rolls it, stows it, and observes mosquitoes and no-see-ums waiting for his arms and legs and bald patch on the outside of the mesh.

He unstakes the rainfly, debones the tent. He folds and rolls and stows. He grooms the tarp, rehoming slugs to mossy logs. He swats and slaps, but blood must here in doable quantities be paid. He folds and rolls and stows until the evidence that he was here has almost disappeared.

With boiled coffee, he surveys. The perfect system.

Up the soft hill two-hundred feet, obscured by white pines from the campsite, is a leveled plywood box. A toilet seat is screwed on top.

Bill eats a packaged nature bar and takes his second cup of coffee up the hill. He sets the plastic bag that holds his toilet paper next to him. Yesterday he sometimes told himself that packing through the woods was not the life, but on this plywood box an hour after dawn, the swarm relenting, he can't fathom why he'll go back to another.

He makes sure his hands are sane, his teeth are clean, that he has water and has left no trace. He grasps the walking stick his father-in-law, long dead, made out of apple wood and sealed in varnish nineteen years ago, and strides, unwound, toward Nahmakanta Lake.

Bill fords Rainbow Stream and counterclockwise rounds the north end of the lake by ten o'clock. By twelve he sits beside a pool of what will soon be pollywogs and eats a lunch of tuna in a poorly wrapped tortilla.

He climbs a hill that turns into a mountain and then flattens, gradually descends, becomes a gorge rim that descends to tangled woods and wetlands where the blazes go awry.

By four he comes out to a tote road, turns right, and crosses the bridge that spans the outlet of Wadleigh Pond. He turns right at the end and hikes along the wooded bank until he sees a stairway made of halved logs in the hillside to his right. The stairway leads to a sunlit meadow and a pair of lean-tos flanking a freestanding fireplace and chimney made of stone. Behind the lean-to on the left, a wide path opens. At its end the trail bears left, the way to the tote road right.

Bill sets up his tent inside the lean-to on the right. He lays his shirt and socks like hides on the picnic table in the sun and takes the log steps back down to the pond. He wades in, swims, takes in the contour of the mountain he will hike tomorrow.

Wiggling water from his better ear, he takes the log steps back up to the meadow and intends to dry off in the sun.

"Good swim?"

Bill takes his pinky from his ear.

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"We met yesterday morning," says the capped one. "In the parking lot."

"No, I remember."

Bill studies them a second. Wiry. Average height. He can't divine intention from their eyes. He wonders why they wear jeans in this heat and understands they didn't hike here.

"No luck at Sing Sing?"

"Sing Sing? No, sir. That was just a ruse," the uncapped one declares. "I'm Tom."

"A ruse? For what?"

"Well," the capped one says, "my name's Elias by the way, today's the solstice and the two of us was wonderin' what your instinctuals would say to being polyamorous with us."

"Polyamorous."

"Yes, sir. No pressure. What's your name?"

"Bill."

"Bill, we get that our approach is unconventional," Elias says, "but it's that time of year."

"What time of year is that?" asks Bill as he puts on a clean shirt and his new cap.

"The summer solstice. Like I said."

Bill unclips his camp shoes from the back of his pack and slips them on.

"I'm married."

"So are we," says Tom. "Both happily. To women who approve of many loves."

"I'm heterosexual. Monogamous."

"The solstice don't care," Tom says.

"You ever been to Stonehenge?" asks Elias.

"You guys are young. I'm fifty-five." Bill doffs his cap and bows his head. "I've got a scaly bald patch like an asymmetrical Aegean island."

Elias doffs his cap and says, "I'm baldin' too. I get how that can hit your self-esteem."

They put their caps back on.

"You take good care of what you got," Elias says. "Ain't no grounds for shame on you. Besides, we saw the sticker on your window. Changes color in the sunlight."

"My *You Are Beautiful* sticker?"

"That's the one."

"That could be taken cynically, you know. Ironically."

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"Could," says Tom. "Seems otherwise to us. You take it truly mostly. Why else strain yourself as you been doin' to be up here. You're in search of the sublime. And so are we."

"Besides," Elias says, "the town we live in, what we posed to you, ain't posable to people there."

"You never been so posed," asks Tom, "down in Connecticut?"

A bullfrog rubberbands below.

"No."

"Hmm."

"I don't know what to tell you. My instinctuals say no. I'm sorry."

"No is no," Elias says. "But let me ask you. Don't you want more love?"

Bill does but asks, "Is love more fuckin' though?"

"You ask that frog down there what makes the world go round," says Tom. "You ask that loon."

Bill swigs some water.

"No is no," Elias says. "But let me ask you, in a time like this, would alcohol do anything for you?"

"It wouldn't alter the instinctuals if that's your meaning."

"We don't ply," Elias says. "Tom'll tell you. We don't ply."

"That's right."

"But you hiked, what, nine miles today with what?" Elias lifts Bill's pack. "Say thirty pounds. An ice-cold beer might be a nice way to end the solstice day."

Bill rubs his chin.

"Or wine," says Tom.

"A beer sounds good."

Tom takes the wide path down toward the tote road and the green Caprice.

Bill and Elias sit down on the split-log benches by the fireplace and examine the chimney and the stonework. A chipmunk suddenly materializes from the stones, inspects them, and then disappears.

Elias says, "Those camp shoes comfortable?"

"Not bad," says Bill.

"You ever go without shoes for an extended period? Like seven days?"

"No."

"You ought to. You would like it."

Tom returns with a handheld cooler and sets it on the bench beside Elias. He removes a long brown bottle with an elegant white label.

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"This one might pack too much a wallop after what your mileage was today," says Tom.

Bill takes the bottle. He's impressed with the selection.

"This one's good."

Elias and Tom each take one from the cooler. Tom sets the cooler on the grass and sits beside Elias. The three of them lean forward as though there were fire.

Bill wipes condensation from his bottle and gets up. He finds the trail mix in his food bag and removes a cupped palm's worth of peanuts, which he sprinkles on the hearthstones where the chipmunk was. Before he sits back down, the chipmunk reappears.

"This is what it's all about for you?" Elias asks.

Bill sips and shrugs.

"I mean we all want some depth of communion," says Elias. "This is that for you?"

Bill's forearms rest on each knee. Both hands hold the beer.

"I guess it is," says Bill as though the central theme of his obituary has been finalized.

"That's right and just," says Tom.

"Seems like you think there could be more," Elias says.

"Like what?"

"Do I look like I have the answers?" asks Elias. "You tell me."

Bill thinks about what more means.

"You know what rewilding is?" asks Bill.

Their cheeks full of beer, they simply shake their heads.

"It's when we let the land just be what it wants to be. No roads. No industry. No recreation. I don't know. No us."

"Once you put a re before a thing it opens up a can of worms," says Tom.

"You can't go back," Elias says.

"Why not?"

"It ain't the world's way."

"Says who?"

"The world. As long as we're still in it anyway."

Tom hands another beer to Bill.

"So how successful have you been with this approach to polyamory?" asks Bill. "What's your success rate?"

"Success rate?" Tom asks.

"Zero," says Elias.

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“Zero?”

“We refine,” says Tom, “but we are playin’ with historically unfavorable percentages.”

Tom and Elias leave before the sun goes down behind the wide path.

Bill sets up his cookstove on the picnic table, boils water, and prepares a freeze-dried meal he eats directly from the pouch as he sits on the stairway’s top step and overlooks the pond he’ll squat by with his filter in the morning.