

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

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Eight Days of Her

Page thirty-eight has rotted away, returned to a soggy pulp. I bought my copy secondhand and have read it twice already, but still, I need it. The next closest book is a two-day walk and I'm not going anywhere today.

She wants me to put it down. I see only her back, her cedar-red hair clumped into sheaves and a shoulder that twitches with each page turned. I can't even see her face, but I know she wants me to put the book down, place my hand on her shoulder, and ask her to turn over. Instead, I turn over and continue to read. Grand Central Station, New York City. Amidst the throng, detective Paul Auster—who is not really Auster and not really a detective—spies two versions of the same man, the insane and possibly dangerous Stillman. *There was nothing he could do now that would not be a mistake.* It's brilliant, and it's not here.

By page seventy the rain's picked up again. I hear it probing the roof, watch the water pool where I found my book this morning. The fly has come loose. Its shadow weighs on the tent like a giant hand seeking signs of life. I'm not getting out.... She's not getting out.

Three or four zippers lie between me and open air, and that's the sound of leaving: the muffled zip of the sleeping bag; the deep-toothed zip of the tent flap; the quick zip of my Gortex. In the vestibule, my shorts and boots form a sodden mound. I leave them, rip the Velcro from the vestibule door and crawl into the grey. Eight days crammed in a tent the size of a capsized canoe and it's hardly more open out here. I crouch to pull the fly tight then straighten and squint into the grey. I search for change, for something to emerge from all this nothing: a brightening, a tree unveiled, a hint of higher ground.

We pitched camp five days ago, shelved here, on a ten degree slope of moss and scree. Bear Creek winds through the valley below, Tombstone Ridge across the slope above. The creek and the ridge, our major landmarks, the crux of our navigation, and both swallowed whole by the mist. Our destination, Glissade Pass, lies another fifteen miles up the valley. She'd seen a photo in a mountain journal, said it would be easy, no ropes. I say we should've given up days ago, turned around when the weather changed and headed straight for the car, or at least to a flatter, drier site. But she chose to camp here, and this is her trip.

"No GPS," she'd said before we left the city, "and no cellphones. We're leaving the technology at home."

She wanted to do this the hard way, the way we used to hike, with just a compass and topo map. I said sure, went along with that too, but we haven't traced the land by look and feel in years.

"We'll remember. It'll all come back."

And it did, at least until fog poured over the ridge, thick and unstoppable like foam off a morning cappuccino. It filled the valley and hasn't moved since. Neither have we.

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I should scrub out that breakfast pot. The dregs of our porridge have dried into papery sheets. I should pack it down to the river and scrape it clean with sand. I should, but the rain's still pounding and anyway, porridge is all we've got. It'll be porridge for lunch and again for dinner. I toss our crusty spoons in the pot and barefoot it over to the boulder where we've stashed our food, hopping as best I can between tufts of moss. It's ingrained, this behaviour: don't step on moss above tree line. On every hike for over a decade, she's lectured me on alpine species, their exacting adaptations, their imperilled survival. Okay, so now I don't step on moss above tree line. I have to wonder though, with only us and maybe a grizzly in this valley, how much difference it would make to sink one bare foot into one crackly patch. Can't see that it would make any difference at all.

My feet are freezing and the only hope of warmth is the sleeping bag so I head inside. I find her turned onto her back, the cool light of the tent reflected in her eyes. This is her don't-talk-to-me-why-aren't-you-talking-to-me look. I get it. I flip open my book and transport myself back to Riverside Park, NYC, where Auster and Stillman finally meet. Her shoulder twitches. She's motionless but for these tiny reflexes, and though I've seen that look of hers a million times, I can't read by it.

"Still socked in," I offer, my eyes on the book. "Visibility's down to thirty feet. No sign of the ridge."

"What's left in the food bag?" It's more than she's said all morning.

"Porridge. Maybe five meals."

"We should've brought more food."

"Yeah, and maybe the GPS."

She rolls away again, a soft swish in her sleeping bag as she turns toward the wall of the tent. I can't imagine what she's doing over there or what she's thinking. I mean, we have to decide: try for the pass or head back through the valley. It's three days to the car through the valley; two to a road through the pass—if we can find the pass. Head up the wrong gully or down the wrong slope on the other side and we're screwed. But she knows all this. It's her trip....

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Feels like early evening when I open my eyes again. The light has shifted and though the rain has stopped, I'm clammier than ever. I run my fingers through my hair, push it off my forehead and it stays there, glued back and sticking up and she's gone. How could I miss her and all those zippers? It's hard to disappear from a two-man tent but there's no mistaking absence either. Maybe she's filling our water bottles from the creek. Maybe she's cooked fresh porridge. I listen for sounds outside the tent. None, but she can't be far. I slough off my sleeping bag and reach for the book.

As I'm getting toward the end of the story—as Auster too hunkers down and awaits Stillman's return—I can't help but feel a little concerned. She's been gone for two chapters now, and wandering is not her style. Getting into trouble is not her style. She's never reckless, especially in the

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wilderness, so this must be deliberate. Another unspoken imperative. Another command. I turn over again and think about when it started, this undertow. Our long grad-student afternoons, lying crisscrossed on her bed or slouched over papers at Benny's Bagels, there was an ease, a kind of stillness. Even when we yelled and slammed doors and left and came back, it was quieter than this silence, more placid than her blank face. When did it change? When she got a degree and a job? When I didn't? When we spent more weekends in Home Depot than the backcountry? I don't know. When I bought the damn GPS?

I thumb through the remaining pages of my book. Just twenty but the light is fading and anyway, I know how it ends. I flip toward her half of the tent.

Maybe I'm wrong and nothing's changed. Maybe she's always steered me in some direction. Like this hike, this trek into the middle of nowhere, how much of me did she calculate? And now I'm supposed to stumble through the fog in wet boots to find her, to unravel the mystery? Or maybe I'm meant to wait, stay here, shout her name across the valley and listen as it echos back. Because she wouldn't answer, would she?

I'm supposed to go.

Fuck it. I'll wait.

My sleeping bag lies coiled at the bottom of the tent, as appealing as shed skin. Her bag lies flat, almost prim, and I crawl inside. It smells of her, eight days of her. I start to get hungry and consider making my own porridge, but I can't eat alone, not with the little food we have left. I nestle down against the damp—I'm Auster in his alleyway, both trapped and free—until my foot hits something hard at the bottom of her bag. She keeps everything in her sleeping bag. I feel around with my other foot until I recognize the weight, the smooth plastic and frayed corners: her field guide. Could've guessed. She's carried that thing everywhere, on every trip I can remember.

I open a page at random, to the Stonecrops, Cassulaceae, where she's marked each species with a tiny check. In the margin beside prickly-pear cactus: "Saanich Peninsula with M. April '09. Spines in M's foot for days." I flip through the other chapters.

Thimbleberry, *Rubus parviflorus*. "Bella Coola. Aug '05. Dessert from fingertips...."

Lover's moss. "Lizzie Lake, Sept '08. Beautiful. M in cabin all day."

Green flecks, dessicated lover's moss, spill from the page. There are dozens of these notes; the entire arc of our relationship preserved in her field guide. Dusk seeps into the tent and I grope for her headlamp at the bottom of her bag. I reach for mine in my jacket, in the pockets of the tent. Not there. I toss my sleeping bag, socks, book, from one end of the tent to the other. No headlamps. She wouldn't have taken them. It was the middle of the day when she left so she'd have no need for a light, definitely not for two.

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Unless she's slipped away. Unless she's hiked back to the car on her own, part of her plan. But what about the food, the stove, the matches? I fumble for my jacket and rip open the door of the tent. I've an hour before dark.

And then I hear it: the crunch of boots on scree, the rasp of Velcro. She's back. We meet on our hands and knees in the vestibule, my legs inside the tent and hers out, like some bulging, eight-legged creature. She looks almost startled to see me, scans my crumpled hair, half-naked body and behind me, the two dishevelled sleeping bags. She smiles an old smile, of innocence and complicity and I know where she's been. The compass hangs from a string around her neck and a headlamp—one, hers—sits wedged in her jacket pocket. She was out making a decision.

I retreat into the tent. She moves toward me, still on her hand and knees, eyes on mine, and I have to ask:

"So what did you decide?"

Her smile dissipates. She pulls the headlamp from her pocket, reaches in again and places something small into the folds of her field guide. I wait; she settles in. A squeak of pencil on glossy paper. She found something out there, she's adding it to the guide, to our storyline. What will she say? What will she decide? I want to ask again but for now, I'll wait. I can do that, wait.