

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

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IN LOVE

"I broke his heart!" Felicia cried, her head in my lap.

"Oh, no," I said. We sat on my bed. The cabin was empty.

"I did," she protested.

I smoothed her arm. A mosquito hovered about her thigh. She brushed it aside. A dusty, fatigue-colored sky filled the window under the sloped roof.

"What happened?"

"I don't know what happened. Things just got crazy." She sat up. "We used to talk all the time and then I didn't want to talk to him anymore and then he wanted to talk to me all the time. He loves me. He loves me more than anyone else and I don't want to see him. I can't see him!" she cried.

"He should understand that," I said.

"Today he wrote me, he read some poetry he wrote for me,"

"Well."

"Oh, I don't know what to do. I'm a monster. I hurt him. He loves me."

"Well," I said. "We'll see. You'd better hurry. You won't have time to dress for dinner."

"Oh, please, please, can I get out of dinner?"

"No, we're going straight to the movie."

"What are they showing?"

"It's a surprise, but it's supposed to be very good."

She rose, gathered a towel and left.

It was the third week of camp and the fifteen-sixteen year olds were restless. Except for Sarah, whose hair was frizzed and whose nose was bent and was permitted to wear rollers and white facial sun block every day, they had had two or three boyfriends each. Nathalie had had four boyfriends. Nathalie was the most beautiful girl in camp. She black eyes and glossy black hair and a low, steady voice. It was rumored that she was dull but no listened or could remember her conversation. One day, she appeared with a chiffon scarf tied around a topknot, its airy ends trailing down her cascading curls. Eleven other girls raced for their chiffon scarves or wrote home for chiffon scarves.

At dinner, there was watery soup, watery stew and watery gelatin. The campers were marched off to a war film. Afterwards, they spent a great deal of time in preparation for bed, applying creams, curlers and for some, the next day's make-up. It saved time in the morning, they said.

I strolled up to the tennis court and waited for Rob.

"Hey, Jean, is that you?" a voice called.

He emerged from a cloud of fireflies.

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"Yes," I responded.

We walked wordlessly until we were in the woods. It was a sweet evening and we laughed and rolled in the moist grass until we were exhausted.

"Sam wants me to paint the flagpole tomorrow," he said.

"You ever paint a flagpole?" I asked.

"No, but I guess it shouldn't be too hard once I get to the top."

I stood and flexed my knees.

"Where are you going?" he asked, pulling me down.

"Well, tomorrow's Visiting Day."

"So?"

"I think Sam's onto me. I think he knows that I'm not Jewish, therefore," I said, leaning into him for one last kiss, "goodnight"

I had come to Camp Ha-Himmel because the smut and smog of the city had made me ill and the thought of two months of romping through the mountains with Rob, my City College boyfriend, seemed a godsend. Rob was the boating counselor. We had midnight breakfasts, use of the oar shack and evenings out in Rob's sports car. Together we discovered a pre-Revolutionary cemetery, a sylvan spot above the tennis court and a tributary to the lake.

The next morning's reveille was an ordeal.

The fog was thick and the fifteen-sixteen year olds refused to get out of bed, refused to wear the regulation green and white shorts and white shirts, refused to file out to flag-raising.

"I have my period. I can't wear shorts."

"You had your period last week."

"I have it again."

"Go to the infirmary."

"I have to wear my red sweater. I have a cold."

"Right and I don't think you'll be better by Prom night, either."

"My face is a mess!"

"Borrow Sarah's sunblock."

"I can't find my jumbo rollers!"

"Use cans."

We lined up for services and raced through a couple of "Hear O Israels!" as Benjy was thrown out for listening to his transistor radio.

Rachel cried.

Benjy was her steady.

I held Rachel's hand as we ambled to the dining room.

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By ten, they were free to visit with their parents.

The parents' cars were quartered on the softball field in rows of colored hot metal closely edged together. I spoke to some parents and I thought I was speaking to all. The fathers wore knit shirts and the mother wore nylon dresses and sunglasses and had short blonde hair.

The heat was oppressive. I strolled among the crowd. The parents fawned, the camp director directed. Sisterhood congregated. The brokers and diamond merchants clapped as their babes jumped off the diving board.

"Maa, lookit! Ma! Watch me! I said Watch me!"

"Felix, get the picture."

"Marion, I have to set the focus. You want to take it?"

I found myself at the canteen. A line of families waited at the soda machine. Nathalie introduced me to her sister, a white haired girl, with black lined eyes. She tugged at the hem of her army jacket with her half-painted fingernails.

"She goes to another camp," Nathalie said.

The camp mother blew her whistle, trying to get the five year olds to come for milk call.

"All right, all right," she said, tearing the weeping children from their parents. She waved her arms and raced among the groups.

I was free for another hour as my fifteen-sixteen years continued to visit. Those without visitors waited at the tennis court with the other visitor-less fifteen-sixteen year olds.

I ran into Rob in the dining room.

"Did you do it?" I asked.

"What?"

"Paint it"

"No, I went swimming."

"I wish I could have gone."

"My parents asked about you."

"What did you tell them?"

"I said we broke up. I didn't want them to ask questions. I couldn't keep on telling them you were Jewish forever. What time are you off?"

"I have night duty."

"I'll visit you. Bunk Six?"

"Yes."

He came at eleven and we made love in the seven-year olds shower stall. One girl woke and stood at the door, staring at us. I gestured her into the toilet with my free arm. She giggled and ran back to bed.

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The next day, Nathalie had a rash and I had to take her into town to see the doctor. She had called her parents and they had insisted. The doctor told her that he thought she would live and asked me where I got the bruises on my legs. 'Well, I'm not pregnant,' I blurted. He smiled and prescribed vitamins. In the taxi on the way back to camp, Nathalie confided that she, too, was not pregnant. They had taken her away to a doctor to fix it and she had to take a pill every day to make sure.

"Make sure, what?" I asked.

To make sure it didn't ruin her pregnancy, I was told.

"But you're not pregnant!" I said.

"In the future," Nathalie whispered.

Rachel ran to greet me at the administrative offices and told me that Rob was in an accident and had gone off with Lynda, the musical director's assistant. The accident was that he promised Lynda that he would take her to town and forgot to tell me. He would be gone that night and the next day and he was sorry but he couldn't spend his day off with me and that was the accident.

We had corn on the cob at dinner and I tried to sleep but the girls stayed awake until dawn.

I was a dancer, a swimmer and the dreams that led me on took me over the black coated lake, across to the soggy bank, cold and wet.

I woke and found the rain pelting my face and my window open.

The next day, I hitched out of the camp. I walked around the town until it was evening and I returned. I joined in a game of basketball with the twelve-year old boys. Afterwards, I sat on the porch of the cabin until the insects forced me inside. The girls had fallen asleep and so did it.

The following afternoon we visited a dairy farm and the girls were in a bad mood. They wouldn't have time to change for evening bowling.

As night fell, I stood on the stairs of the cabin with three other counselors, one of them the new girlfriend of the waiters' junior counselor.

"I know that he went with a camper, but I don't care. We really like each other."

I leaned against the railing.

She smiled. "He wrote poetry for me".

"When I went with him last summer, he wrote poetry for me," said one of the other counselors.

"You went out with him?"

"So did I. This winter," said a third girl.

"Why did you break up?"

"He got on my nerves."

"Me, too."

The new girlfriend laughed. "He seems to get around. His poetry

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seems to get around.” She rose, distraught. We exchanged glances.

Color War broke out and the camp divided into teams.

One morning, state troopers stormed into services and I thought, “Jesus, they going to arrest me. They found out that I’m Italian” but they didn’t. They arrested Benjy for using stolen credit cards. He was back in camp the next day and won all the tennis matches for his team. He was a camp hero. Rob rarely came to visit anymore and began sporting an underwater watch that Lynda had given him. They were getting married in the fall and he was quitting school and going to work for her father, a perfume mogul.

One evening, just before camp ended I met the waiters’ junior counselor up on the tennis court and he read his poetry to me. He asked what I thought. I looked at his book and said “I think you should write in pen.”

We undressed and I remember thinking, as my back pressed into the darkened clay, of the beauty of the distant stars.