

Searching for the Shore

It took a cigar burn from a Romeo and Juliet on my arm to realize that the longest days I've ever had were those I spent searching for the shore. Years ago, on a day when my air breathed was thickly black of soot and ash that poisoned once supple mountain air, I glazed over a balcony's vista, and the world, like a map, unfolded, rose, and spread out; though in doing so seemed no closer. For the Rockies had clenched and held lasting their remaining pine trees from a forest fire still raging, giving the air a tint of opaque color that became more apparent when looking far into the distance. Though the hotel's appearance would cause aesthetics displeasure, my night prior was all but displeasureable. Behind me laid two beds with patterned coverlets, cribbing my dear friends during their wholesome slumber. Brenton, Shana, and a short, weary eyed guy named Paul, were cuddling so lovingly in the bed closest to the once glass impeded opening I crept through just minutes before to enjoy the delicious tequila sunrise god had let pour over the mountains.

Shana was on the edge of the mattress closest to me, firmly grasped by Brenton. Paul held himself just sheer right, a selfless lover, still wandering in the dark corridors of his lonely mind, searching for the salvation that comes with clasping his half-a-piece with another. Friends of mine, Chris and Jessica, had stayed the night as well, and all my friends were in drug induced stupors except for Chris. Chris, like I, had not slept, and set out on foot some time ago to trek on to the closest market for a banquet to soothe our hungry souls.

My unlit cigar, half blind, jutted out, alone on the balcony table. I, being all fanciful like some time ago classic Celt, displaced my cheap butane lighter in my drawstring bag, hurled the sack aback my torso, and set search for matches inside to give purpose to the future butt. The room was filled with beer: some cheap sort that had been acquired only for reasons of frugality. What was left inside had stained the once plain rugged white carpet. The other cans lay in the bushes outside the balcony, where they had been disposed of improperly for the purpose of having (what we thought was) no connection to us.

Walking inside, I saw a vintage birch desk, and like a spark I could not have consciously lit, I remembered Brenton yesterday evening opening the drawer and shouting sinful bombastic cries of profanation while holding a holy book. "*This fer gawd's people!*" the last word strained in his evangelical mockery, sounding suspiciously similar to 'pee-hole'. Opening the drawer myself, I found matches on top of used tobacco resin, strewn over the complimentary bible, as if Brenton had attempted to make an ashtray of it. I checked the pack to make sure there were some left, and most all were, and before I slid out, cigar in hand, to enjoy my tobacco heaven, I heard a quick upright motion that caused a long din to resonate from the old bedframe.

"You can't light that in here." Brenton said, his tall torso towered forward.

Searching for the Shore

I chose my words cautiously. "I know I was just..."

"You can light it if you want to but you'll have to pay the \$200 fine and pitch for the room that I let you skip out on." It was actually \$40, but I knew not to rebuttal.

I scattered the words that played scrabble in my head, and caught my tongue before an utterance could occur. "I'd rather just..."

- "Rather just what?"

I shrugged, like a lamb set off to die. "Go out". I was peering with my puppy eyes up toward him with discontent.

He waved the cigar towards the door. "I did steal it for you; might as well try it if it's not too much to ask."

He walked past me, over me. "Not at all," I whispered, dogging behind.

We stooped at the border of the balcony, arms limp, stretched over the edge. "Would you light this man?" He flicked his crusty yellow lighter pointlessly, the frail flame sparking only to die in a desperate wind.

I smiled happily, realizing my intentions to light the cigar like a businessman; but I looked like a golfer. I swept the match cross the box and that crackle, spitting invisible sulfur roundabout, came with a sense of warmth and homeliness, like I had been sent back a life to watch the old me, restful and light headed, carrying a soul that neither sighs nor sings no more. The moments following could be called my new beginning; all my memories rushing back into my consciousness to flutter about freely, but in some bordered space where I could catch them at my own accord, and look upon them with fresh eyes.

I only knew later that Brenton had noticed a lack of liveliness in my eyes, an empty vessel, too out of body to even consider the physical husk I left hollow in the *real*. It came to me like a daydream, one that was in no way lucid, not unlike those films forced on poor Alex during his "rehabilitation". Oh but the sounds, not Beethoven this time, but rather that of a fleeting past, like a song sung in whispers that can still be heard; as if amplified.

Then an "Ah!" and some obscene language, in which I can surmise was entirely superfluous, left the tip of my lips as I blew searing hot cancer dust off of my arm. This whole time, the whole time, my mouth was a shelter for the cigar, like a pacifier, I knew not of it for minutes, assumedly breathing it in like true air. I grabbed the cigar from my mouth and set it on the table, still blowing the resin from the ashes dropped with waves of breath that must have been a colossal hurricane to the thin fibers sprouting from my arm.

Searching for the Shore

Brenton laughed, but with a sincere bout of empathy he lead me inside, "Wash that before it stains your skin, and get me a beer if there's any left will yah." I dragged myself inside, and with a sudden rise to climax, the girls surrounded me with verbal tidings of a new day.

"You were going to tell us a story Mark!" said Shana, still tittering over some joke with her hands cupped over her pink lips. Her smile showed only through her squinted eyes and outstretched dimples. Ah, she was all that would make priests beg for mercy, wishing to rid themselves of their celibacy and bask in more than one of those pleasurable sins; all that from just her blond hair and pleasant cheeks.

"Is he... Mark you've come back to us!" said Jessika, stepping out of the small hotel bathroom. She was a busty brunette, but it was her personality that elevated her level of attraction for me to near Shana heights; close but not there. Both were lovely, both were young, and they viewed Brenton, Chris, and I as mature for already having entered the coveted world of college, even if only for a year.

A feeling rose over me, not a sickness, but that of senescence. I'd lived for years on that balcony it seemed, peering through the haze, searching for unshielded stars. I dropped down on the floor, lotus, stunned parietic against the mattress pad, all soaking wet from frothy beer spilt the night before. My borne contrivance was an ability to draw stories from my past, letting my friends listen to my monologues. The lofty scripted language headed by my laconic tone brought forth enough of a reaction to almost make up for my inability to socialize comfortably. I had no lies to spit, and I intended on telling the tale of a tattered meth creep who forced my friends and I into conversation just a week ago, who was so immediately incomprehensible that the wisdom he brought with him was laid on my friend James like thick tar, flashing a possible destined resemblance. Though James was not present, and neither the rhyme nor rhythm to pull off an inside story with friends outside my hollow sphere. So I lay back, and drifting back to the memories that came with the cigar, the rush of the burn, it erupted, and I spoke of it. I tried to ignore the ironies -those only evident to me -and to tell the real, pertinent story, of a boy whom I once knew.

"This story is about Collin Greenske: my friend who lived by the peaks, though I suppose at that time it lacked the hellish inferno that is creeping over our mountaintops," I said, simultaneously turning my upper torso toward the window, flames barely visible through the musty precipitate. Shana looked as if to agree and add a noteworthy, "I know," but she said it all with her face, with subtle but elusive physiognomy.

Though I leaned toward forgetting, rather than reflecting, on the majority of his upbringing, I wished to grasp a dreamlike time, a picturesque double feature, all vivid and dripping of insight. These lives, drawn out, were sketched on history so poorly, like illegible signatures. But these days shaped him, incongruently, unsymmetrically; carving a limestone

block into spectral delight. I had set sight for my memories of him out of a hopeful reach for self-attainment, and to find that word. A word bolded, a word strung out, a word that shimmers.

I swayed back and forth, looking for that word, glowing odalisque features in a dreamy sky, but spelling out the stars so lucid and free, like a predisposed future. I longed for the ineffable.

“In the midst of summer, Collin yearned for spring’s tenure. His dad raised him with a strong belief: that formal education was pointless, “like a business man studying politics” he would say, though it took him years to erect the ironic cynicism from those words.”

Illuminating then in my consciousness were his childlike aspirations, extracted like bodily fluids; a stream of sickly green sewage all horribly screeching down a narrow tube, towards that open space where my fears and thoughts collided, going *boom*, *swish*; and thusly congealing; all unified. I ignored all signs to stop dipping into my memories, out of fear of catching some primordial archetypal residuum that would forever stain the mouth of my soul. After tossing away my inner thoughts, I continued.

“He tended to make meaning out of everything, whether insignificant or not. He had a habit of reading the world like an oracle, like one of those crazy Russian broads, finding a sign for every event in his life, in hindsight of course; and at least that gave him a sort of control over his future. Like how born-again Christian teenagers retreat to their bibles when sex isn’t an option.”

Shana never expressed a definite distaste for Christianity, but in being a supposed Hindu in America led to her savoring all satire set upon Abrahamic traditions. She giggled, and like a confused newborn pup, tilted her head like a lid ajar, seemingly relating my analogy to some real sad souled Christian she had met.

“He once dropped his glass marijuana pipe, taking it as a sign that he should drop out of school. He did so that morning.”

I paused and saw an estranged look on Brenton's face. I knew he was asking himself the question, promulgated from his eyes, as to whether this story was real, nearly real, or a mere myth for audience pleasure. He straightened his shoulders, and with a subtle glance, assured himself that he knew the answer. I returned to my story as noon was encroaching, heeding to that simple system of the sun; burning, searing with unbearable heat in some cloudless Russian desert, but on us, shining down a crimson splatter, blurred out by the gaseous ash; but it helped us escape from the darkness.

“Collin neglected himself, as did his family, drawing his upbringing to other sources. Collin arrived at school that day and was greeted by Mr. Whiteman, (his teacher) before entering his classroom. Collin was set aside by his teacher one day in early June, a few days before the

Searching for the Shore

semester had ended, and his teacher patted him on the back and glanced away, exhaling before telling Collin, "All bodies come into this world an empty vessel. The only way to escape the masses is to grab some bullet quick wit, and *run with it.*" Advice that he could not take for years, not understanding the words his teacher threw at him. Though who can place blame, spending four years (at the least) in the esteems of collegial academia, and all to teach children some pre-made set of rules and laws.

His classroom was dark and bleak, but managed to have a single painting, a raven ripping some poor carrion apart; I believe an albatross. Schizoid-like stares often peered over sporadically, the parents mostly, afraid of a harmless darkness that meant no danger but the fear it created".

I had once buried my eyes deep into the canvas myself, all that white destroyed, painted over so purposefully. Art seemed like destruction to me. A slate of pure white that can only be made less pure, a solid block that could only be chipped away, and a beautiful silence that could only be distorted by the wavering sounds of a lifetime.

Chris suddenly grabbed the room's attention once upon entering. His dark hair dripping of rain; which we did not realize had been pouring since the beginning of my story. The girls looked at Chris with stunned eyes, like a row of faces waiting upon a shiny neon stoplight to turn green during rush hour. Brenton in an aloof tone spoke, "Keep going man," that sort of alpha male leadership he learned from reality TV.

"He came home on a Friday evening. His friends were never on the same bus-ride," I said, noticing how the room regained its mellowness since starting the story up again.

On the lonely ride Collin must have been thinking things over, because often enough I would see him afterwards and there would be invisible tears drowning his face, as if always wiped them away the instant before I appeared; though at the time I had not brought such an image into my ken of knowledge

"He tried to walk into his room, but was interrupted by almost crushing his cat, who quickly reacted by maneuvering between his feet. She moaned, but not like those sweet girls I spend my time with, just wishing for attention." The girls took no notice to the offhand reference and I proceeded. "The willow stairs creaked and clattered, and for a minute moment, he thought he had seen his brother, and walked beside the apparition into his brother's old room. It was empty, just emblems, trophies, and a closet full of clean, organized clothes; and by now the vision had faded.

Collin spoke to me of his brother winning the state championship football game, along with his team. After being praised for his accomplishments, his physical prowess, Collin's brother looked at his younger sibling, as if Collin had accomplished the feat, and told him, "Collin, those moments when your heart beats, and your words slow to a stop, those times when

Searching for the Shore

you have to make some quick decision, and you think only of the ones you love, those are the ones worth your time, worth everyone's time.'”

I glanced back, at the time wondering why I had brought his brother up at all; but in trying to overcome my rite of fiction with the truth I held, I kept uttering the events, even if at the time superfluous in meaning.

“Collin snuck out of the room, but not before his father peeked from the start of the stairs. He drunkenly yelled some harsh words I hope he regretted, and Collin left to his own room.”

At this time, Jessica set eyes on me and her mouth slowly gaped; one of the more intelligent girls I'd met, conquering Collin's abilities of hindsight by enacting precognition, like I was telling a story already told.

“Collin never told me quite what happened since he left his brother's room, but afterwards he quietly trotted to the backyard and sat caressing the roots of the time too old maple tree behind the home he knew. He drew his knife and slit an 'x' to mark his place, a daily ritual, but today of all days, the root spun back into place, and the 'x' became a poorly shaped cross. Collin walked to the bushes. He always dug, hours on end, spade in hand, and hope in his mind. He wasn't after treasure; he was just trying to find something worth being found.

Then, a roaring wave of metal and screams sent his knees to the ground. He first saw the smoke, then the gleam of the sun, and that was just the fuse. It took minutes to scorch his home, all burning up in some horrible nightmare. He feared for his parents and ran towards the house, but his neighbor saw him and yelled, shaking Collin to the ground with force. Collin sat in the old man's backyard. He calmed Collin with his presence, staring at the maple tree that crippled slowly, beaten by the flames.

A deafening roar came about, hurling piles of drywall; plaster tumbling down like a mudslide. It came at once, glistening and fading, red to black, black to white. The house screamed almost, wood bursting, splintering, and smoke brewed in the air. His neighbor left and went around to the front of the house, but before leaving asked “Collin, boy, don't leave, I know... I don't know, but can you please; stay here?” After waiting alone for several minutes, Collin wept in the garden of his neighbor, tears watering over the seeds the elder man had planted earlier that morning.

Then out of the fog, the man came back, with a smile that seemed to Collin as though, “having a secret hidden there in his teeth.” “Collin, your parents, *they're alive!*” he yelled. Collin ran without a moment between, hurrying towards the front of the heap in search for his family, now alive. He saw his mother, neither a word nor expression upon her dust covered face, and once seeing Collin, her face lit with a gleam of enjoyment and relief, springing Collin up and burying his head in between her breasts. “Suh... suh...” she couldn't speak; but nobody could.

Searching for the Shore

Collin looked over at his father, first since the fire, and started to turn his torso towards him, but his mother grabbed him and held him, still crying, but now in a deeper tone. His father was holding a tattered cloth, grasping it tightly to his chest and burying his head into the earth. Lifting his head, Collin's father unraveled the ashy cloth and revealed a golden trophy, the same one garnered from the championship win that I spoke of earlier.

Then at once, awe struck Collin's father, and he came to notice the sight of his wife and child holding each other. He stared at the fire, still burning, but much less fierce. He stared, losing his eyes in the flames, and the awestruck smile was replaced with a look of disgust that overtook him, and in moment of remorse, Collin's father hugged his son, if almost for the first time, and cried."

-Shivering in the heat of a second sun, blackened by the smoke, it came like a nightmare turned lucid, and with a will of might. Dust crept, and the shadows were surrounding them, almost as if to say something, but only murmuring below their threshold.

The room fell silent and with a look to the ground Shana puckered her lips and spoke slowly, "I guess we better get to heading then, right Jessica?" Everyone but Chris was already planning their day, the girls asking Brenton to drop them off at home, and Brenton having a near empty gas-tank when they asked for rides on all occasions, like some sturdy law of nature. I stood up; head rushed into submission immediately, but with enough energy, I entreated my body to return to the balcony. I went to close the screen tightly as to not draw the attention, and following me was Chris with a perked smile, both of us noticing the rain shimmering in our peripherals like TV fuzz. I slowly treaded to the edge, as close to that steep fall as I could and was sprayed by the windy water. I set my sights on the distant horizon, and for some unknown reason, I was looking for a body of water, though neither a lake nor river, but rather a shore. As the rain fought ineffectively with might against the blazing apogee of flame, I took to realizing how I felt as though I've witnessed, almost experienced this moment some many times before.

"I bought a bread loaf and some meat if you want a sandwich?" Chris asked, my approval hanging on the tips of his fingers.

"I think I'll just take a slice," I said happily.

"No meat?"

"No thanks, the air's been making me queasy since we got here."

Chris's face fell to a neutral sigh, and he slid the glass wall shut once leaving the balcony, looking as though he was asking the others where the loaf went.

I look over the edge of a balcony as I did that fine day amongst the company of my friends, and reflect on my own memory of that night, just as I had once reflected on the story of Collin: a friend who carries a soul that neither sighs nor sings no more. The fires repeat, the

Searching for the Shore

water dries, the plants die, and soon winter comes like an angry messenger of Hades, abducting the seasons I wish lasted forever. Then spring will come, more rain will fall; and rain: drenches it does the new, leaving the old to prepare a future for those who started living; and wash away do those who began dying.