

# Camp

Leaning on the rail gave me strength. Metal pinnings don't give way under pressure, but the tiny cement cracks along the base told a different story. I squeeze one foot between the iron posts and wonder if I will be able to remove it.

The word market had been crowded with people earlier today, people unable to complete their thoughts. The air was heavy with the prospect of conversation, but my words were stubborn in coming. I was not able to steel myself enough to say what I planned and now it was perhaps too late. My summer ritual – eight weeks at the beach to write and reflect – was coming to a close one more time. Early in the season, I am always full of plans. I promise myself I will do more than last year, I will write more than any year, I will take a full, complete and intact manuscript back to the city with me. I will make my words public.

I wiggle my foot a bit and relax when I know I can shake it from the rail if I need to. I push it back in tighter this time, moving it beyond its original safe spot. I like the possibility of danger.

The market seems like the perfect creating spot. Rows and rows of colorful umbrellas each imprinted with a company or business or product name have a familiar feel to me. I can read chunks of canvas fabric while I eat. I always like

coming here, eating outdoors, trying to invent new words out of the letters already boldly imprinted. I believe my words can flow here and when at a loss, I can scramble new ones just by glancing up at umbrella row.

But my words and thoughts did not find common ground today. The thoughts, rich with feeling, leaked out as thinly as the small puddles of water brushing against the shells just beyond my metal-framed foot. My foot starts to sting a bit and I can see some red blotches forming where the metal meets my skin. The pressure feels good. I look away.

The first group of umbrellas is beginning to close in on my chance to recreate my opportunities, swelling one moment; cranking shut the next. I follow the letters as some begin to fold up for the night.

The word market may have proved disappointing today, but I have come back this evening to speak my mind, make my confession to someone less judgmental than most. I am clear in purpose, but I fear my words might spill out soft and gauzy, like my summer dresses. I do not want words covered in warming blankets. What I need are sharp corners and edges. The umbrella letters cannot fail me this evening. Earlier today, I could not piece a single word together even with an abundance of vowels and consonants in my line of vision.

Suddenly I spot him. He seems to have arrived effortlessly. One minute I am alone and the next he is here. He greets me warmly and tugs me a bit watching while I wiggle my flip-flopped foot free from its metal cage. He notices the red diamond-shaped impressions on the top of my foot, but I look away. I don't want him to know that he has seen evidence of my anger.

"Was it a productive day?" he asks tentatively. I have been writing all day and I know he has spent the day hopeful for me. He looks at my hands. I realize he's checking to see if I have brought some evidence of my writing, some sheets, a draft of a chapter perhaps, for him to read. I unclench my fists and spread out my fingers so he knows for sure there is no surprise draft.

"I'm disappointed," I squeak out, when I see that he is really the one filled with disappointment. I should have said, "I am unraveling."

If I were truthful, I would have told him, "You can't see my words - no one will - for just as they find comfort on the page, just as I am beginning to feel the signs of excitement and accomplishment, I do what I have always done. I separate my words into unintelligible scraps that need restructuring. They will always be left in pieces." But I say nothing. I am unable to piece the truth together for him.

I don't say that passing breezes send only single letters to me. Where is the

complete alphabet when I really need it?

"Let's eat before the cafe closes," he offers and we quickly make our way to a spot we frequent. I see him glancing down at my foot again. I don't peek at all. I imagine the blotches are fading.

He does not sense my determination – I know how to keep my emotions in order. Tonight, though, I promise myself there will be disclosure. I will articulate my loss and tell him what I have done, but the subject changes and he is onto other topics. He asks how far I have come in my story, but since I have no logical answer, I turn to my old standby conversations pieces and talk instead of my childhood and its disappointments. This might help segue me to the truth.

"You should be over that by now," he says in a hushed voice, bits of relish freeing themselves from between the bun and burger. I lose my courage.

"I'm still recovering," I manage to say. This sounds okay to me. It is how I usually sound. I wait for a moment, almost expecting to see better words, the right words, float in front of me.

"Well, eat," he says encouragingly. "We don't have all night. Maybe I can go back home with you later. There will still be time for me to read some of what

you have written this season.” All summer we have met here on the beach, maintaining our own summer rentals while still managing to be inseparable, discussing everything but the truth. He doesn’t know about my patterns and habits with writing or with men.

I can't tell him that what he wants is impossible. He cannot come back with me tonight. I have not tidied up my room or my words. The words are no longer in order. They are in piles on the floor alongside damp towels and torn sandals. Old habits have returned. Months of writing - all out of order - irregular bits are all that remain. Instead, I just admit to the messy room and laundry piles.

“I’m embarrassed,” I confess sheepishly. I can see that he is imagining my messy room, but I have other embarrassments.

I recall other frozen moments where no words came. Suddenly I am transported to sleep away camp - my first time there. I desperately want to leave and I have only just arrived. I am unhappy and understand what it means to feel homesick even before camp has officially started. I see my father's car slowly exiting the campground, but I don't scream out, "Take me home," even though I know that is what I want to say. I scan hundreds of faces on the camp’s front lawn and spy the letters on everyone's uniformed t-shirt, CAMP ALVERNIA, but all I can see are words I quickly reform – perhaps it says “ALERT” or maybe it’s “ALARM”.

This is the very first time I understand that the letters I need are all around me. I see word creation possibilities everywhere. Their message is clear, but on that day, my sound is absent. I see my father's car take one last spin around the camp entrance, where all campers have lined up to give a good-bye cheer. My father's car moves much slower than the rest. But I am just one of a hundred girls in the same t-shirts and shorts. I wonder if he can pick out the seven year old me in this crowd. I see his face for a moment. I strain to get a glimpse of my mother who is in the passenger seat, but I am unable to make eye contact with her. She may have been able to read my distress. I think my father suspects I may run off the camp line, but he follows the rules and leaves. I do as well and stay.

I can hear myself scream, "Stop! Don't leave me here," but it is all in my head. I have changed my mind, but still I don't move. I am certain I want to leave, but I can't make a spectacle of myself and the car finally drives off while I am lost in word formations.

I stay at camp all summer. I write letters home, letter after letter of my sadness, but the camp director knows I am in need of discipline and rips my words to shreds. Each day she throws the pieces of my letters into a big wastebasket in the hall and late each night, I retrieve them while the camp sleeps. I own those words no matter what condition they are in.

The camp director has other plans and she writes to my parents herself telling them how happy I am at camp. I am apparently too busy to write, she tells them.

I learn silence that summer, and at the end of camp, I bring home a box filled with letters my parents have sent me, telling how pleased they are with my camp success. I don't care much for these letters. They have no purpose other than to act as a covering for the hundreds of torn pieces of the letters I had written; my notes have been reduced to tiny shreds of alphabet squares.

A letter home a day, seven days a week, for eight weeks - 56 correspondences form the bottom layer of my box. No attempt to reattach them - and there were many - proved successful. My camp notes, on colorful yellow paper imprinted with smiley-faces, filled with the raw feelings of childhood are never read. They stay in pieces. I comfort myself, believing that some day, when I am older, I will reconnect the bits of paper and read my feelings, but I know they are safer in their current form and let them be.

"Why aren't you eating?" he says, perhaps noticing that I am far away once again. His words are brisk with concern. I have no retort, so I simply smile and shrug. He reminds me that the cafe will close soon, but I know that already.

"Even words need rest," I think as I see a Cinzano awning sign with red and green letters crinkle and close just beyond his head.

Inside our favorite café, a waitress plays with the metal sign at the front door. It makes a clink as she flips the "Open" sign around. The word market was giving a message. No more words were available. "I'm on my own now," I think. No decoding left.

"Hurry," he encourages me. "You'll be hungry later. You'll regret not eating anything now."

I push my plate toward the center of the table. I can be defiant. I see our waitress heading over to our table with a take out container, but I wave her away. Without words, I tell her I won't be taking anything home. She doesn't know that my room is already cluttered with the remnants of summer.

Wordlessly, once again, we send a signal for the check. The last of the outside patios are closing. The word market has gone silent.

I am still searching for my voice as we walk to the metal gating separating the market from the rocky beach. I see the first signs of the end of the season.

There is more pink and orange in the sky. I can go home soon.

He grabs my hand and twirls me around. He tells me I can be alone tonight if I



need to be, if that is what I really want. But he imagines I will change my mind and ask him to come home with me.

"It is, what I want, I mean, it's what I need," I tell him gently. He is a low-pressure person and I don't think I will find another like him. I won't see him again after this beach summer. My relationships are seasonal, but I haven't told him this yet.

"I'll call you in the morning," he promises, and I am confident he will. I say words I know are appropriate and tone them in a heartfelt way,

"I'm just tired," I whisper letting my eyes reveal my exhaustion. I use common words - words that live on the surface.

"I've done a lot of writing today," I continue to offer, when I read his disappointment.

"I've been working non-stop and I still need to go back and re-read what I've written. I've put all my words on paper. I have nothing left right now," I lie, while looking directly at him.

He seems disappointed, but I don't know how to change that. I look around for some words to put together, for something to say, but nothing appears.

We hug quickly. We will meet tomorrow for a late breakfast and I promise to bring some writing for him to see, but I know that's impossible. He leaves, hopeful for the morning. Patience is his virtue.

When he is out of sight, I return to the metal fencing, a new spot this time and squeeze my foot in the narrow space. I choose a spot that is very snug, with iron that is sharp and rusty. I make some decisions.

I'll call him in the morning and tell him I am happy and everything is okay. I will tell him how well my night went and how much I've accomplished.

But my newly shredded drafts, heavy with the adult me, will go back in my writing boxes with all the other tiny pieces of freed emotions.

By morning I will have stuck my hands in the bottom of the box once again, shaking all the bits and pieces into new spots of disorder. I like it that way. The summer ritual will be complete. Eight weeks are nearly over.