

Zora and Norah Begin a Trip

Zora and Norah were friends, though nobody apart from them could recall how that happened. If you asked Norah, she would answer you first in a short, curt explanation, complaining that she really didn't remember. After a moment of thinking she counted on to scratch her chin, look off into nothing and tell you the entire story. That's just how her brain worked.

If you were to ask Zora, her large heavily lidded eyes would light up and her explanation would come with descriptive precision. She could even tell you what they were both wearing that day. That's just how her brain worked.

On the surface they had absolutely nothing in common. Zora was tall, standing a clean and exact six feet. Her shoulders were confident, no doubt the product of finishing school. Zora was prone to putting her hands on her hips, and rolling her eyes, both habits she had picked up from her mother. Her up bringing had been effete, and she still had her coming out dress hung up in Mississippi. Despite the things she had going for her in this world, Zora's dental health was not one of them. Her upper jaw grew forward, giving her an overbite. Her mouth was unable to always conceal her teeth on its own and Zora had to train herself to keep her lips closed. It was a rare thing to see Zora smile in a photograph and not feel a great pang of embarrassment.

Norah was mousey, with awkward home-cut hair and eyes heavier than Zora's. Unlike Zora however, Norah was able to hide her poor teeth a little better. She had poochie cheeks to contend with. Her entire life Norah had been a dainty woman; a preacher once remarked that she would be carried away on a breeze like an unsecured top sheet hung out to dry. Her stare was sleet on a Midwest morning. She read more than she talked and drank more than she read. Born to a sharecropper in rural Georgia, Norah had done just about everything legal, and something that weren't, to make scratch for her family growing up.

A person's life is written on their hands, and these two women could not have been more different. Norah's hands were small, almost frail but had the weight of the earth in them. She had more than a few nicks from picking cotton and one large scar along her left thumb from peeling potatoes. This didn't stop her from being the best piano player in three counties growing up. Her hands were good enough to earn her a trip to New York, but not to make a living. Zora's fingers were longer, her hands were larger, and they flew across the keys of a typewriter just as Norah's soared across piano keys.

Zora had come to New York after Norah, though Zora was older. A rather stuffy literary publication had invited both women to a dinner party for new writers and artists. Zora wrote fanciful comedies and the occasional satire. Norah's realm was plays, short stories with a political bend, and horror.

Zora was significantly more prepared for a social event such as this than Norah was. The tall woman put on her favorite dress, did her own hair and makeup, and selected the perfect pair of shoes for the occasion.

Norah had to hurry from the dry cleaners to put on a well-loved wool skirt, white shirt, and small belt.

It didn't take long for Norah to become a wallflower. She could sense the rejection in her conversation partner's eyes long before she finished her comment about stage direction. Norah morosely watched a paper boy packing up for the day on the street below. Her inner monologue flayed her social skills and self-esteem.

"Finally." she had said to herself. *"I finally found someone to talk to and he didn't want to talk to me. He clearly didn't want a connection with a fat cheeked, southern girl who wore the wrong clothes."*

"What could you expect?" he had said to another party goer later in the evening, far away from Norah. "I couldn't understand that philistine accent."

"Penny for your thoughts?" Zora had asked in her airy, sweet voice. Her voice had a unique ability to always sound kind. Norah looked up; her heart bloomed.

"Just admiring the sidewalk. I'm Norah Rigby." She said and extended a hand.

"Zora Whalen." She dared to smile with her teeth.

"May I ask where you hail from?" Norah asked with cute timidity in her voice.

"Mississippi. Jackson to be exact. Whereabouts do you call home?" Zora was just as happy to hear Norah speak. She could hold her own in New York high society. But her ears were lonely.

"A little place outside Columbus." She paused before adding. "Georgia."

"Well speaking like that I wouldn't think you meant Columbus Ohio." Zora retorted.

From then on, the two women were two sides to the same coin. The moon and the sun. The cat and the dog. Norah was thinking about this meeting in the early summer of 1932 while sitting under an oak tree in the Catskills. Norah was having a wonderful time at the party until all the sudden she wasn't. The less than pleasant alcohol Norah had been consuming was starting to reach her system, causing her head to feel like a fishbowl full of water.

She sloshed around and sat under a tree, trying to get her balance. The night was warm and still. Norah had to hand it to this part of the country, at least it was quiet at night. It felt lonely to her, so Norah didn't dwell on it much. Resting her head on the oak tree, she listened to the mumblings of people in the house a few yards away. Norah closed her eyes for fear of the lights, strung all around from tree branches to clotheslines would make her sick. The dipped and bobbed on a colorful sea, and it was too much for her.

"Norah Rigby?" said an indignant Zora. Norah didn't have to open her eyes to know exactly what would be waiting for her if she did. For a fact Norah knew it was Zora. No doubt her hands would be firmly planted on her hips, and she would be looking down on Norah with disapproving eyes.

"What?" Nora groaned without the good grace to open her eyes.

"Frank Denison is begging to hear a ghost story. Says you tell them the best and he wants to hear one before he leaves for Annapolis on Monday."

"He can buy my book."

Zora replied with anger. "You know as well as I he's not going to do that." But her mood ebbed away when she really looked at her friend. Sitting under the tree, looking paler than usual and clearly not fit to tell anyone much of anything. Zora's voice turned into a hushed whisper. "Between you and I," Norah cocked a single eye open. "I don't think he can read well enough to understand you." Joked Zora. Norah just smiled. In a different situation, she might have found this funny enough to laugh at, or perhaps mean enough to call Zora something rude. As drunk as she was, all Norah could do was smile.

"Fine. I can manage the Wilderness story. People like it." She said letting out a sigh and opening her other eye. Zora helped her to her feet and Norah brushed grass off her trousers of which she was very fond. The cool night air sobered her up enough, though her stomach was still sixes and sevens. Norah's balance was shaky but improving as they approached the house.

"I'm leaving soon." Said Norah as Zora put her hand on the door to venture inside.

“Where are you going?” Zora asked, her eyebrows furrowed. She truly loved Norah, but her method for delivering news was lacking.

“I got a letter yesterday. Jimmy is gonna sign papers.”

“So, you’re free!” Zora’s heart lifted. But she sensed this wasn’t the end to her news.

Norah groggily lamented, “So, I gotta go to fucking Macon.”

Zora sighed disapproving of her harsh language. “He can’t mail them to you?”

“Says he won’t sign unless I come in person. I’m gonna take the train.”

“That man’ll follow you till you die.” Zora said.

“Maybe he’ll beat me there.” Norah said, a wry whisper in her drunken eye.

“Norah Rigby don’t speak like that.” Zora protested and clutched for a necklace of pearls that wasn’t there. Norah shrugged. Zora pulled the door and let Norah walk through in silence. An idea suddenly overtook Zora. She couldn’t in good faith let her best good friend travel all that way by herself. Norah would need a companion.

Norah had a gift with words that seemed to be scrimshawed across her soul. Polluted though she was, Norah settled on the edge of a comfortable chair, a sort of ad-hoc dais.

A man in an expensive suit Norah didn’t know looked thrilled. Sitting next to him was an aloof looking blonde-haired woman who clearly felt this opossum of a waif couldn’t craft anything more sophisticated than an elementary primer.

Norah lit a cigarette, brutish and strong. The smoke settled her mind, and she was ready. Zora stood up against the wall a few feet away. Standing over a friend of theirs, the flamboyant Mr. Tatum. Zora knew this story already. She had edited it for Norah a few years previous. The story went unpublished.

Norah blinked and began.

“You Yankees don’t recall the worst battle of them all...”

The room was silent at the finale. The black-haired woman looked like she might be sick to her stomach. Norah rose, walked outside calmly, and got sick all over the grass. Whatever she had consumed didn’t want to be in that room either.

It took more than a little coaxing for Zora to get Norah to agree on a road trip. “It’ll be good for you Norah. Good for your writing.” Said Zora, standing in Norah’s bedroom doorway. Her suitcase already packed and downstairs by the front door. Norah was still in bed, nursing the fallout from a bender performed when she got back to New York after the party in the Catskills.

“I’m taking the train, Zora.” She protested and pulled blankets over her face.

“You haven’t bought the tickets yet.” Zora said, her hands where Norah knew them to be.

“You don’t know that.” Norah said.

“I do know that. Sure as Mr. Tatum has blue eyes.” Zora said.

“His eyes are green.” Norah said being difficult.

“You would know. You’re the one who tried to kiss him.” Zora knew this would get a rise out of her friend.

The sheet came up. Norah simply had to defend herself from such an accusation. “I did not Zora Whelan.”

“I know. Get out of bed. I’ll make coffee.” Zora reached down and pulled the blanket clean off her best friend’s bed and exposed her petite body. Norah didn’t bother to cover her chest, which was exposed to the stuffy heat of her bedroom. Instead, she mulled her options. Zora Whelan was nothing if not a professional at railroading Norah into doing things.

Norah rolled her body from the bed and put her small, bare feet on the wooden floor. Zora called from the kitchen. “We can take a train to Richmond. I know someone who will set us up with a car.”

Norah rubbed her eyes. “You want to drive to Macon?” She was too sleepy to add much emphasis in her voice.

“I surly do. It’ll be fun.” Zora replied, and Norah could hear her pour water from the faucet.

“I hate you, and your crooked sense of fun Zora Whelan.” Norah said, losing the fortitude to stand and flopped back on her bed.

The sunlight sliced a band of yellow light across her breast and down to her knee. Norah thought it was like a strop of providence, ready for her soul to sharpen itself for her return to Georgia. It had been years since she had put herself on a train to Chattanooga and eventually to New York. Her husband Jimmy

stayed behind. Not for any other reason than he had found something worth staying for. She liked marigolds and red glassware.

Norah eventually got up, put on a clean pair of undergarments and dirty men's shirt. She wandered into the kitchen and sat down at the only table she owned. Zora was fussing over the stove.

"Make sure you clean it before we leave." Zora said of the ice box.

"I will." Norah lit a cigarette and poured herself a cup of coffee from the pot Zora had placed on the table.

It was weak, and that annoyed Norah to no end. Zora made a scrapped together breakfast, and it did the job.

"I'm surprised you make this as well as you do." Norah complimented Zora. "Here I thought you were raised better than red eye gravy."

Zora smiled. "I was. But you weren't. Besides. I already ate." Zora took a sip from her own coffee cup and enjoyed the light tasting liquid.

Norah didn't own many clothes and so packing was easy. The morning at street level was warming up quickly and the air was greasy with industry. Norah was annoyed and hid it poorly. Even the course way she lit a cigarette betrayed her disposition. Zora hailed the taxicab that took them to the station. Zora wriggled in her seat when they arrived.

"Ok?" Asked Norah, getting out of the car.

"I'm melting is all." Zora decided to spare Norah a pointless story concerning her brasier strap and sweat tickling her back. Groups of people were coming and going as they always did, and the pair did the same. They were early for their train and Zora stood on the platform, observing the world from under the brim of her favorite summer hat. Norah sat on a bench with her own hat over her eyes.

Zora Whelan had a gift. For all her ability to make polite small talk at the dinner table, her eye was more than likely trained on everything except what was being discussed. The tablecloth and the table beneath were infinitely fascinating to her. A train steamed into position and Norah stood up. She yawned; the headache Norah had been nursing was still chewing up her patience. Without considering her friend Norah automatically walked toward the train and got ready to board. Zora did the same and approached the train car. Norah's feet had just taken the

first few steps before Zora put her suitcases down. The sound of metal feet clicking on the concrete made Nora turn around.

“Before we leave,” she said over the hissing steam and chaos of people pushing around.

Shortly Norah asked; “What?”

“Let me take your picture.” From her suitcase Zora took out a camera and with poorly hidden exasperation across her face, Norah allowed her friend to snap her picture.

“Hope it turns out.” Zora smiled and slung the camera around her neck, she bent down to pick up her suitcases.

“I don’t.” said Norah sardonically.

“You’re the living end.” Zora said smiling at her friend’s joke. “Besides. IF you go to see Jimmy,” Zora said hauling her suitcases down the aisle, “and you die as you seem so fit to do, that’ll be the last picture I ever take of you.”

Norah laughed. “A portrait of an artist as a dead woman.” Zora had to concede one gift to Norah Rigby. She had no fear, and more than that, she had a mind to match.

Both women took their seats. They bickered as sisters while getting settled. A middle-aged woman sitting in a seat across the aisle who would normally have never addressed strangers asked where they were heading. The question took them both by surprise. Norah had inflated paunchy cheeks as the woman spoke. She had been concentrating on an idea for a story. A rather unfortunate tell as it made her a terrible card player.

“Canaan.” Replied Norah without missing a beat.

“Macon Georgia ma’am. We’re going to Macon.” Zora said trying to cut across the joke.

“Away, away, away down South in Dixie.” Cooed Norah.

The woman smiled and remarked that listening to them sandpaper each other was like; “two birds sharing a nest.”

“That may be.” Said Norah. “But neither one of us can fly.”