5-1-2006

Visiting Room

Courtney Smith
Concordia University - Portland

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol14/iss1/5

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by CU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Promethean by an authorized administrator of CU Commons. For more information, please contact libraryadmin@cu-portland.edu.
My hair is long—it would hang all the way down my back if it weren’t in those ridiculous pigtails. Such hair hasn’t graced my head since those days; we took the scissors to it at age nine. I’m wearing an outfit of a disgusting peach color that always looks darling on a six-year-old and horrid on anyone above that tender age. The shorts are short, the shirt has ruffles on the bottom seam and shirtsleeves, and a white flower design disrupts the solid wall of bright color. I am seated on his lap; my legs dangle over his, drawing my eyes down to white schoolgirl ruffled socks above black and white saddle shoes. My arms are straight, my hands press down onto his legs. This straight-armed pose gives my shoulders a slight shrug and adds a tinge of cute innocence to my broad smile.

He’s there too of course. My shoulder blade leans against his chest. He’s not a big man, but I’m so tiny, he seems large. His smile is big, similar to mine, except his right front tooth is chipped. White buttons line the front of a blue short-sleeve collared shirt, tucked into dark blue Levis. His face exudes delight, his eyes shine, and his smile makes his cheeks rise high and his reddish blonde mustache stretch out above his lip. His hands grip the front of my knees, holding me to him, and we sit, frozen in time long ago, enjoying a rare moment, as rare now as it was then.

My hand trembles as I hold the old Polaroid and look into the faces and the experiences of my past. I see us smiling, posing happily, and I nearly laugh at the truth the picture doesn’t reveal; the nothing that is the everything of my very person. The photo lies to its viewer. We may look happy; in fact, we may actually be happy, but failing to reveal the whole truth makes it a sham. My mind is flooded with memories of everything I can’t see beyond our smiling faces. I can’t see the tables with two connected chairs on one side sitting in lines across the large open room. The tables are all the same, but some of the sets of chairs are beige, some salmon, and others burnt orange. I remember I never wanted a table with orange chairs, they were
These men were in charge, it was best to be nice to them, they were ugly. I can't see the strangers sitting at the other tables, but the bored but stern looking men checked out the playing cards and the backgammon boards. It is only because of the many decks of cards I borrowed from this counter that I am a master at “Big Casino, Little Casino,” the most absurd card game in all of creation. I can't see the far right corner of the room where a television hangs from the ceiling and small children play with stuffed animals and Legos. I was the shy kid who watched the other kids play happily with one another even though they were complete strangers. Playing over there wasn’t my top priority anyway; I was in that room for a specific reason, and playing with an overflowing toy box wasn’t it.

We're in front of a whitewashed wall and we’re the only subjects of the Polaroid. You can’t see the room full of quietly conversing people, the too clean, too plain walls, the shiny linoleum tiled floor. You can’t see the far left corner of the room where a doorway leads to a small room with two more doors, one “men,” the other “women.” A severe hailstorm brought a golf-ball-sized piece of ice through the skylight in this room one year. You can’t see the wall of vending machines. Soda, juice, coffee, water. Chips, crackers, cookies, candy, gum. Sandwiches, burritos, cup o’ noodles, fruit. The selection was rather large and never disappointing—the one plus side of the vast room. We were always there for hours at a time and quarters were the only thing they let us bring in.

I can’t see the only two doors leading out of the room. The first, the one through which I entered and he could not pass through, and the second, the one through which he entered and I could not pass through. These doors were heavy, opened with a buzz, and had a small rectangular window in the upper side. They seemed loud and menacing to me as a young child; the finality of their closing always brought a wave of hopelessness, a deep sadness I had no control over. I can’t see the windows. The picture was never taken in front of the windows. I can’t say I blame the photographer (if he merits the name); the windows were the worst part of the room, the saddest.

A sort of desert stretches out beyond them; no matter the time of year all was brown, barren, and lonely. It seemed so open, yet it was closed to him, and to me while I sat with him. We were in a cage of layers; the room held us, tall metal held the room. The room was closed to outsiders, the outside closed to him. To be together was only a possibility in this one place with plain whitewashed walls and ugly orange chairs.

You can’t see my grandmother, my only connection to him. Without her, there would be no Polaroid, no tumultuous memories, no father. She stands in front of us, watching as we smile broadly, smiling back, happy she can be a part of us. Her wrinkled face and curly brown hair appear in other photos; the photographer would have us all pose together once in awhile. In those photos, her smiles are never as big as ours though, and they don't reach to her eyes. Sadness still sits there and the happiness in the photo is shattered. The photos of him and me are rare, but in those few pictures, we are always delighted. It is as if we are completely happy; looks are deceiving. These may be more pleasant to look at, but the photos of the three of us show the truth. Hidden sadness brought to light.

My back hides the black numbers written across the white strip on the breast pocket of his blue collared shirt. The first set of numbers I ever memorized aside from my telephone number. It wasn't a requirement to store them in my mind, and they would have done me no good in an emergency, but still I knew them. How could I not? In that room, those numbers were his identity. My grandmother and I were always in the room before him, and one by one numbers were called on the other side of his door; hearing his number let us know he'd soon be walking through. One person at each of the tables had their own set of numbers, and I knew without asking that every other person at that table knows those numbers, whether they desire to or not.

Our apparent comfort with one another belies the fact that physical contact was an annual, semi-annual in a good year, event. Phone calls kept us going in the in-between times, visits coming when my grandmother could make the time to travel from her home to take me to see him. This Polaroid is one of several. A sequence of photos, the same pose repeated at each meeting. Our smiling faces always present, his image seems to
be cut and pasted; only my clothes and my size change. We always look so happy, so content, but photos don’t always capture reality. The photo is simple, but the memories are complex. I would be a completely different person if the circumstances behind the photo were nonexistent. Our true feelings are hidden behind our smiles, which were real at the time, but masked a pain that molded both our lives.