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To Narcissa

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Towering hills, a series of miniature mountains rising up above the lush green valley below. The two siblings, star and shadow, cut sharply by a cool sparkling river. The only noise louder than the glacier-spawned water is the deafening hum of summer crickets, cicadas, and bees ruling in their untouched home. In clouds they zoom from brush to bloom. The trees watch from the hills, weary in the summer swelter. A frenzied, adrenaline-laced fear tinge their dry and parched frames, the possibility always present that at any moment a spark, a bolt, could end their centuries of existence.

In one patch of the valley, robbed from the crickets, cicadas, and bees and oblivious to the forest's plight above, cars and minivans are parked along the seldom-traveled road. Men stripped to white t-shirts and jeans grimace as the ambivalent sun blanches their skin and moistens their receding hairlines. They spend all morning driving silver poles into the earth and stretching weathered canvas across them. Within their freshly birthed and fleeting walls, women in starched blouses with hair swept tightly above their dewy necks in bleached blonde buns flutter around round tables, spreading crisp linens, setting plates, and perfecting sprays of blood-red roses.

I'm at the window in the lodge, the one man-contrived structure that obstructs the God-sculpted landscape within miles and miles. As if aware of their transgression against nature, its architects had taken great pains to stay loyal to the crickets, cicadas, bees, and trees they intruded upon. The entire interior and exterior was constructed of exposed logs, giving it an inconspicuous cabin look. Were we the first ones here to orchestrate and oversee our creation. Dad, still the varsity football player whose letterman's jacket is fraying in the closet, is helping with the canopy. Matt's outside with him, bonding with the father we'll soon both claim by the end of the afternoon. Mom is looming over the caterers, being a tyrannical, devoted mother of the bride. Here I am, alone, the only one who can see outside the well-planned camp amidst the buzz.

My fascination with the odyssey for Oregon began in the farthest stretches of my memory, as a kindergartner in Western Washington. Wednesday was Computer Day, when Mrs. Armstrong took our class into the Apple Computer lab, where old, comically archaic beasts by today's standards ate floppy disks the size of a Dr. Seuss book and spat out blocky text and stick figure-esque graphics in green and black. My consistently favorite game, contrary to my computer buddy's objections, was The Oregon Trail. Given a virtual family of emigrants, it was my divine duty to guide their tiny little wagon from Missouri to the Oregon Territory. As elementary school went on, the popular game evolved with advances in technology. Screens got 256 luminescent colors, floppy discs morphed into CDs, and soon you could visit replications of Chimney Rock and Fort Hall. The pioneers themselves even changed. They got voices. I hated recess with a passion, so when classes broke I'd hunker down in the library to buy pixelated bags of flour, judge whether the conditions were advantageous for fording the river, and recommend the best course of action against a nasty outbreak of cholera.

In the daily shade of books, whose influence permeated my veins, I was driven to take on my own independent study of this phenomenon. Reading the real stories and legends of these represented people I'd bonded with, I became more and more fascinated with their place in history. What dangers they'd faced! What trials they endured! By their own accord, they tore their entire lives up by the roots and gambled their very existence for a promised land. What was this place? What was it all for?

On road trips, I begged my parents to stop at historical sites I'd studied. The Whitman Mission. The Barlow Toll Road.

I've only been here twice before, but it has been a hundred, if you only excuse reality. The rich, fragrant valleys of the Willamette and the treacherous, beautiful Columbia. It was the gold at the end of the rainbow for thousands who set out for this place, a failed dream for thousands more who set out and failed.
Every time I could bring myself closer to these people, to this dream, I jumped rambily at it.

After I graduated into middle school, Leonardo DiCaprio and Cover Girl took over my dorky history love. The adventures of the Oregon Trail and the promise of the Willamette Valley didn’t even cross my mind until half a decade or so later, in high school, when my parents packed up their new Ford Expedition for the Great Cross-Country Family Road Trip from Seattle to Arizona to Vegas. We drove south down to Portland, then headed east at the river’s edge. Somewhere around Pendleton and The Dalles, the trip barely begun, my little brother had to go to the bathroom. Dad pulled over at a little roadside state park, which featured nothing more than covered restrooms and a couple of picnic tables.

But the park didn’t need to boast anything for the beauty its boundaries claimed. A lush green valley on one side, flanked by a sparkling blue river that separated from stretching timber-dense hills that filled up an unclouded horizon. Blue flowered underbrush gave the nameless mountain a glistening, ethereal quality, like an ocean wave frozen on the crest.

Alone, next to the picnic table, I looked at all that stretched out before me, and I suddenly understood what all those theoretical little people I marched across the simulated prairie were toiling for. I could skip Arizona and Vegas. I could stay here forever.

Five years later, I’d all but forgotten about the fleeting rest stop visit, despite a move from the Mt. Rainier plateau to northern Portland and, later, the southern suburban outskirts of Hillsboro. On a few occasions I reflected serendipitously on my childhood fascination with the Oregon Trail, which had, strangely enough, led me to my eventual adult home, but my mind never wandered back to those sparkling blue hills rising above the crisp, shimmering river.

Until two winters back, when my parents were in town for my father’s birthday. Mom had made a reservation at the Columbia Gorge Hotel way past Tualatin, famous for a world-class farmer’s breakfast and touted as America’s Most Romantic Hotel in all the Portland Bride magazines in which I’d secretly been indulging. I was cooking lunch at home when she called me from the road.

“Hey Mom, where are you guys?”
“Hello, we’re just now passing Centralia, and I wanted to stop at the Pfaltzgraff store, and Dad and I want to grab something to eat at Arby’s.”
“Good times.”
“Are you working tonight?”
“No, not Thursdays,” I said, thankful for my small and all-too-temporary reprieve from peddling lingerie and boudoir accessories at Lloyd Center.
“Do you and Matt want to have dinner with us?”
“Uh...” If there was one thing Matt wasn’t ever too keen on, it was venturing anywhere outside the apartment on a weeknight. He brags about his old party-all-night ways, but I find them rather hard to believe when he’s asleep every night by nine. “I’ll mention it to him.”
“We’d really like it if you could—” she drew out in that mother sort of way.

Spending the day with the cat, rolling pair upon pair of washed socks as the heavy winter rain caught the wind and threw itself mercilessly against the window, I decided quite firmly that I wanted to see America’s Most Romantic Hotel. I wanted to eat from the kitchen which birthed the World Famous Farmer’s Breakfast. So I didn’t ask Matt about it. I told him we were going, and he was driving.

“The Gorge? Do you know how 84 is this time of night? It’ll take us two hours just to get off the Banfield.”

As it turned out, the Banfield was the least of the trouble. Any inclement weather in the greater Portland area is amplified by about ten thousand along the Columbia River, and the wind howled against the poor old minivan with a furious vendetta. While Matt struggled to keep the car on the road, I gazed blankly out the window, feeling incredibly guilty for insisting that we set out into the untamed wilderness, where we could probably die and never be found. Without the benefit of streetlights or city neon, we moved along carefully, guided only by the illumination of the landscape, which emanated from the half-moon and vividly clear stars. My eyes adjusted to the natural darkness, and I could see hills rising out from the crystal river below. Fresh virgin snow flocked the trees at the summit, trickling down to a scant dusting by the base. My heart began to beat...
wildly, and I pressed my hands against the window like a child on Christmas. “Matt! Look!”

“Sweetheart, I’m driving.”

“I’ve been here before,” I murmured, pushing against the glass, trying to break free. This was the heaven of so many dreams I’d felt, the paradise I’d barely stopped at, the most stunning spot in my universe. “It’s so beautiful,” I breathed.

The top-heavy van swerved to the right, knocking my entire head straight against the window my nose had been pressed against. “Honey, are you all right?” He asked tenderly, freeing his hand from the wheel just long enough to brush my shoulder.

“Yeah.” I sit back in my seat, sitting still and rubbing my reddening forehead as we trekked on.

In the frigid snow we pulled into the hotel, met by my well-bundled parents. We exchanged hugs and exclamations over the weather, completely unaware of the magnificence towering above us, veiled in moonlight. It had slipped out of my mind, anyhow, replaced by the anticipation of dinner and presents and good wine.

A heavy door opens and four excited pairs of feet shuffle in. Laughter echoes amidst the vaulted ceiling, and the world melts back into the moment. Brianna has the dress, Christine has the shoes, Leslie has the Victoria’s Secret bag, Chelsea is chatting with the hairdresser. All to shove me off, an all-too-willing participant, into this new world. I turn away from the river and hills. Today, once more, I will be distracted by parading guests, and cake, and tears, and a veil that I will try to keep on straight. The mountains, rivers, and valleys will become wallpaper in an endlessly photographed gala, far behind who gets captured drinking champagne straight from the bottle and who cries uncontrollably. I won’t see them. They will only rise and flow and appear after they’ve been forgotten.