

A-foot and Lighthearted

A-foot and Light Hearted

Ramblings of a Modern Day Gypsy

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I. Dreaming of Meaning

“I don’t know what to do.” Allen whined, his eyes darting between the three of us frantically. “Should I go east or west?” He asked, switching his balance from one leg to another.

It was July, meaning it was just about time for his mid year crisis. It was not uncommon for him to ditch his apartment, move into his car, and drive across the country for a fresh start. After much debate (some would argue his mind was made up all along), he quit his job in the city of angels and rejoined our ragtag team of tumbleweeds, who were all going through forms of crisis of our own. I say rejoined because it isn’t the first time Watts, Allen, & I spontaneously left our humble lives behind in search of something new. Something different, something grander... Only last time, it truly was done at the drop of a hat.

You see, it was a late Monday night in the midst of a New York September, meaning some days were pleasantly cool, while others reminded us we were still in the summer solstice. It had been after one of those weeks where I lost sight of life’s purpose and I fell asleep dreaming of meaning (that should be a song- “Dreaming of Meaning”. I’ll have to file that away under things to inform Watts of). Anyways, I craved finding this purpose, this meaning, drooling like a wolf does its prey. So I sent a lone message to my two gypsy cousins, at a time close to midnight, telling them I needed to leave and sought their companionship. To where? I don’t know. For how long? Well, as long as we can, of course.

Fortunately for me, it was just in time for Allen’s other mid year crisis, and for Watts, he was in the middle of a spiritual journey himself. Their response? No questions asked- they were in. I informed them we would be roughing it- staying in tents, no consistent access to showers, living out of our backpacks. I needed space from society and the box it crams us in. *Perfect*, they said. After all, Watts had just spent a few months roughing it in backcountry South Dakota with a buddy panning for gold, where he lived out of his hammock, happily surrounded by rivers and trees. *My kind of people*, I thought to myself.

We left not too long after. I gave my managers just enough time to prepare for my absence, for I did not want to return home to no job. Off I went, driving the fourteen hours necessary to kidnap my companions, only stopping in Cleveland, Ohio, which was about halfway through.

We were gone about a month, maybe a little over. How long matter not though, but what did was the substance that existed within those days. I traveled from coast to coast, the furthest point from home being the mythical Olympic National Forest, which is nuzzled on a peninsula off the northwest coast of Washington. Along the way, we made many stops. Glacier National Park, Mount Rainier, the Grand Tetons, the grandfather of National Parks, Yellowstone, and more. We can thank men and women of our past, those like good ol’ Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir, for those protected public lands. They are a backbone of our country, as essential as the water we drink and food we eat.

Each stop was more ethereal than the last. In Seattle, our group of vagabonds nearly doubled in size. My sister and her boyfriend traveled from southern California and met us in Seattle to travel the Pacific Northwest with us. It was their first time in that area, giving me the opportunity to show my sister around. It is usually the other way around in our relationship, as she is eight years my senior (but half my height in stature).

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I had thought a journey of that magnitude would at least quench my thirst for adventure for a little while- but how wrong was I (a reoccurring theme in my life, you will see)? Instead, it created a thirst that no gallon could suffice. I find it better that way though- to stay thirsty. Take it all, but let me keep my thirst for adventure, if nothing else. It fuels me, like coal does a furnace.

“Come east.” I prodded Allen, knowing better than to waste my words. Though he may ask for advice on where to go, he has no actual interest in taking it. In fact, the more you tell him what he should do, the further from it he will do. I told you- he likely had his mind made up all along. But that’s okay, it’s part of his bit.

“A New York summer sounds nice.” He daydreamed. “Or I could go to Santa Cruz.”

“But New York is closer to Europe.” I added, as he planned to leave in the fall to spend a year traveling across Europe, Asia, and Australia. “Plus, we will be in New York.” He nodded his head in agreement, but his eyes said otherwise. They bounced around, finicky as a flame.

The back and forth went on for a while longer. But in the end, Allen’s path diverged from ours that day. And that’s okay, I didn’t expect him to stick with us for the entirety of the road trip anyways. He needed time and space to think, without pressure or the need to work around others’ schedules. I admire that of him. I, too, find myself very overwhelmed from any form of constraint. I need space to spread my wings. When I feel trapped, I will quickly fall to a panic. I fear permanence, commitment, and all other things necessary to be a functioning member of modern society. But unlike Allen, I find it difficult to be truly on my own. As the youngest of five, I was always surrounded by people and rarely had time alone. I didn’t even have my own bed until perhaps middle school. I have also been fortunate to a large group of close companions- more like family than just companions- so it is rare for me to even run mundane errands alone, such as going to a grocery store.

Allen, though, he just leaves. He leaves it all behind and moves to the beat of his own drum. Attached to nothing, he’ll travel to new places and start fresh. He is as charismatic and charming as they come, so making new friends anywhere comes naturally to him. Similar to Watts, people are drawn to his energy, even though both of their auras differ greatly, they are both desirable to many. *And rightfully so*, I nodded to myself as I drove us south out of Yellowstone, to the land in between there and the Grand Tetons.

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I am a flame
boldly bouncing in a bonfire of thought-
untamed and wild-
free as a bird soaring through the sky,
but when the right wind gusts by
my flame dries.

I am a flame
finicky as a cat,
dimly fluttering in a cold wind,
melting slowly for temporary warmth,
only to return to freezing darkness.

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II. Travels Down a Damned Dirt Path

For twenty miles we followed that damned dirt road. My forester bounced and shook, hiccuping at every water filled hole along the way. *No way in hell we'll make it through this without a tear in at least one of my tires*, I thought. But I keep my thoughts in my head, where they belong. Fickle showers bellowed through the sky all evening, each marking its turn with a deep rumble, like a stomach waiting to be fed.

At first we passed through what once must have been a dense and lively forest, but is now burnt remainders of aspen trees, their thin damaged bodies lacking limbs or life, surrounded by tan wiry grass and colorful wildflowers- born from the ash of the last. Colonies of hoary tansy asters- muted purple in color- fuchsia watersmartweeds, white angelicas, fields of arnicas of all types- but each consistently a bold yellow... Speckling the ground, reminding us life will always prevail.

We meant to just drive four miles down this hidden road, unbeknownst to the swarms of tourists who plague Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons, overcrowding it with their ten-mile-per-gallon mighty "American" trucks and RVs. But as a self-proclaimed true adventurer with an ego paralleling the size of June Lake knows, four miles is rarely four miles. And, to me, the further down this goddamn bumpy trail, the further from that zoo of tourists that plague the roads, with their Disney shirts, gem-stoned cowboy hats, and bright red heels (I mean seriously, come on. Who plans to go to a national park and thinks *hey, you know what shoes would be best? Bright red three inch heels!*)

Unfortunately for my ragtag crew, we aren't the only ones who see through the shams of industrial tourism, but still want to relish in the overwhelming natural beauty- so we keep trucking down that goddamn dirt road, passing all the filled lots designated for backcountry campers like us- except they are those who have a much better sense of time than we do.

I could care less as we pass through. The forest is reignited with life- the fire that once scorched this land never made it this far. At the blink of an eye, prickly conifers began to tower overhead. As if the first few miles was a glitch in the matrix, we are now surrounded by lush green rolling hills, covered in dense bushes that the hungry white-tailed deer use as cloaks hiding themselves from pesky travelers like us. Every so often, one pokes its head out, staring at our noisy vehicle bumping along the road. *Here comes another one*, they must be thinking to themselves, rolling their eyes with their mouths full of fruit, before dropping their heads back down and engulfing themselves behind a thick layer of forbs.

But we are moving slow. Slow enough to catch a glimpse of these scrawny deer, slow enough to notice the rain water drip off the pinecones that hang lightly among the pine trees and into the dewy grass below, slow enough to see the glimmer in the creeks that twirl around this road and slow enough to not pop a tire on these damned rocks that protrude out of nowhere, which I am convinced exist only to remind us, *hey, slow down- what you're looking for is right here*.

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“Where do you want to sleep tonight?” I ask, as my eyes lazily scan the outline of the jagged mountains that abruptly stab into the horizon, poking through clouds that look like leftover trails from a sloppy paintbrush.

“Somewhere west?” Watts says after a long, thoughtful pause. Ah, yes, maybe west, I nod in a thoughtful consideration, before my mind begins to wander.

“Or maybe north.” I pose, my eyebrows raising at the thought.

We have the same conversation every time the sun begins to dip from the sky, as we aren't the type who values in-depth planning. I say in-depth, because contrary to the opinion of some, we did what we consider a baseline of necessary planning. As in, we planned to be in Yellowstone, so here we are. How we will spend our day, what we will eat for dinner, or where we will sleep at night are unnecessary details that only constrict us and limit our day's potential. Live free, I say, like a bird in the sky, bound by no-thing.

And each time we hold this conversation, my sister squeezes her clunky crystal closer to her heart, perhaps her mind wondering, *how the hell did I get stuck on the road with these two airheads?* Not a single night did we go without a place to sleep, we remind her. *You are not leaders*, she says. *We just lead differently*, Watts says. But she doesn't seem to find it very comforting. I shrug my shoulders, to each their own.

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Live free-
A soaring bird,
Bound by no-thing.
For you are the one
Clipping your own wings.

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We get to a plot of land, just between a raging river and a windy road and set up camp. By now, we have perfected our routine and can prepare for the night quite quickly. My sister and Watts set up the tents. It is his first time sleeping on ground for quite some time, he prefers slumbering in a hammock, gently rocking in the breeze through the night, with nothing but an endless night sky above him. I take a stroll to collect some firewood. Lucky for me, my job is easy today, for the river had pushed piles of driftwood to its shore, neatly piling them- practically begging me to gather them. *Now, now*, I mumble to myself, *there's enough fire for the whole lot of you*.

When I return, camp is set and sage is being burnt, cleansing the air of any negative energy- or perhaps from our stench. Unsurprisingly, we ended up camping neither north nor west, but somewhere southeast, we ultimately decided, to further us on our voyage to the east coast. And boy, do the stars look beautiful here in the southeast.

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Maria tucks away into her tent for the night, while Watts and I lay beneath the stars for a bit. We are deep in the Shoshone National Forest, where the sky is lacking light pollution. We are still far enough west to not be bothered by suffocating humidity or swarms of bugs that plague the east coast. The sky is so dark that you can faintly see the milky way's arms, stretching out before us, showing off its clusters of stars. We watch for shooting stars and satellites.

"You see that?" He points to a small beam of light, flying across the sky before quickly disappearing.

"Yes." I reply in wonder, as the fire crackles for its last time for the night. But I don't make a wish, because in that moment I have nothing more to desire than what is presently in front of me.

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I am first to stir in the morning, forced out of the tent I share with my sister by the sun's intense rays. I laid as long as I could, not eager to start my day, before the heat became unbearable. I jumped out of my tent and changed into a swimsuit and headed towards the river. Without hesitation, I pulled my shorts off and jumped in, knee deep, as it was shallow, and began to bathe myself. We hadn't showered in a few days, so it was about time. I pulled my razor out and began shaving my prickly legs into the river. The water was ice cold, exactly what I needed to release me from the intense clutches of the midsummer's wrath. At some point, I looked up to see a woman paused on her bicycle staring at me with a dumb look on her face. For how long she had stood there, I don't know, nor do I care to. I raised my hand, giving her a friendly wave. *Mornin', neighbor*, I thought to myself. But as soon as our eyes met she began to ferociously peddle away. I shrugged and continued on my business.

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