Any Resemblance

7/4/2020

Do you want to know what he told me that night? What he said as we walked through the snow in our thin rubber boots, pushing our way towards the field where the wind blew white powder up in great sheets? What words he used, while the five of us stood in our six-month home under the orange light of round university lamps?

*

We were out late, very late, and all the paths were deserted. Our gamble was on classes cancelled—we thought the snow would be too thick and too icy by morning. We weren’t sure, but we didn’t much care; the arctic weather was too precious and too rare for us to sit—all of us—in one dorm room, stewing in clutter and unproductive uncertainty. So at 12:30 in the chill January morning, we ventured out.

The handrails of the walkway between our building and the rest of campus were encrusted with ice, and so was the ground. A new snow layer was beginning to accumulate, covering the muddied and re-frozen vestiges of last night’s storm. We walked slowly, carefully, looking out towards the bay where the lights from an old industrial zone lit the falling snow with an alien glow.

Library windows gaped down at us across the whitened quad, warm and inaccessible. On we went, avoiding the not-yet-solid puddles of the main square, keeping watch for our comrades’ icy attacks. I had no gloves, and neither did N., but that didn’t stop us from kicking slush at each other, and—if we were brave—packing snowballs with our bare hands. N. had it out for me that evening, even when our informal treaties demanded he take me on his team. But I, too, could play the game. We all got soaked, all ran out of breath. We sprinted across the drifting snow until our lungs seized with cold. And when we had ice in our eyes and our coats and our boots, we opened the door to the lecture hall at the far end of the field.

It must have been past one o’clock, but the building was unlocked. I dropped to the floor and shook the clotted snow from my shoes. My coat—bought a week earlier at the behest of my sister—had entrapped me, its zipper lodged in place at the neck. I struggled out of it nonetheless, and jogged in stocking feet to meet the other four as we entered a room equipped with a sizable projector. Our outer layers were dropped on desks, and we climbed up to join them.
As we stood in the emptiness of the hall, P. idly entertained the idea of hijacking its facilities for our own private (midnight, snowstorm) film viewing, but we decided against his proposal: we preferred to get back to our cold white night before it was over. We watched nothing in that room, and it was it not in that place that he told me what he did—not in the lecture hall or on top of the desks. It was later, when we stood within the shelter of the stairs, waiting for L.’s phone to capture us in our icy finery, that he spoke.

Earlier that evening, when I knew I’d have time before my roommate’s nightly ritual, I had washed my hair—I didn’t think we would be in the snow only hours later. I was absorbed by my routine (I had noticed that my hand had cramped, but that was all) and only vaguely aware that a foot of powder had graced the assorted features of campus architecture. I was unprepared, is what I mean: not thinking, never thinking, of what could happen.

My hair was wet, then, when I left my room: wet at 12:30 and frozen at 1:40. And as we all waited under the stairs at the latter hour, stomping our feet while L. took our photo, I moved my head and realized the state of my locks. I was amused; N. and P. asked to touch the strange, ossified strands. They laughed; I laughed. But I must have looked odd, must have said something about my work or my worry, because P. turned towards me with an exasperated expression and said that I had no right to fear, that I’d done enough: it was obvious, so very obvious.

I did not believe him.

*

I am not sure why it is that night I remember most. The evening before played out in almost the same manner, and so did the day after, the day we all rode the bus downtown to eat, tromping in and out of shops until we found one that could hold us.

Certainly my tendency to tinge memories with unwarranted emotion will have played no small part, but it is also true that I don’t recall P.’s words with more clarity than I do any other moment from that evening. (My frozen hair seems just as salient as the confession.) I have not determined what it is about the memory that has cleaved it so with the intensity of the time. What that night means, I think—and this is all the sense I’ve ever made of it—is the result of a condensation of recollection. It stands for everything that changed and everything that has, in the days since, changed back.

*

I could tell you all the other moments I still see, you know. I could write about the afternoons I spent on the floor of G.’s dorm as I panicked about the work I was convinced I would never complete, the strange hours I spent with her while she played Bad Brains to cheer me up and drive me away. I could detail the forest walks and long nights of study, my desk and my classes
and the sensation of finding myself, occasionally, to be able. I could list my favorite rooms and volumes and views, or the streets and people I saw the most. Perhaps I should write a longer story, to try and catalog the entirety of it all—consign to ink and paper a task I have completed in my mind all the nights I’ve spent since I left. I would do such a thing, if I thought it would suffice.

To tell one tale is what I have chosen, then, however incomplete it may be. It is all true and untrue, honest and full of lies, but it is what must be written. For what else would I say to you if I were to explain it all, now that the buildings are locked and sanitized and I am beginning to forget just how strange it was, how very near and very far and so very, very long ago?

“It’s funny,” I’d say. I’d be sitting next to you. We’d both be miserable. We’d both wear masks. “It’s funny,” I would tell you, and I’d remember how hard I had worked, how odd I had felt. There’s a good chance I’d cry. But “it’s funny,” I’d say—“he told me you loved me.”

Undue significance a starving man attaches
To food
Far off; he sighs, and therefore hopeless,
And therefore good.

Partaken, it relieves indeed, but proves us
That spices fly
In the receipt. It was the distance
Was savory.

- Emily Dickinson