

Mountains from White Hills

by Whit Honea



"Reading Hemingway always makes me wish that I drank more," he said as he sat the book down on the table and picked up his cup of coffee.

"You should," she said smiling. "There are still moments in the day when I think you might be sober."

"I'm sober now aren't I?"

"Yes, you are sober now. For now." Her eyes did not go with her smile.

"Come on baby, you know I'm not a drunk."

"I know, Jake. I know." She had been doing a puzzle while he had been reading and after a short pause to let her words sink in, unsure if they were meant for her or for him, she continued with it. He sipped his coffee while looking at the lines of the city through the window and wondering how long he should wait now before he made himself a drink.

"It's funny," he said, "how sharp the buildings are against the horizon. They almost seem fake, like a movie set or a giant billboard."

"Or a puzzle," she added, not looking up.

"Or a puzzle," he repeated slowly as he traced the outline of each building with his eyes. "You're right, Anna, that's exactly what it is, a puzzle."

She smiled when he spoke. He did not give her praise often enough and his words warmed her.

"Will you make me a Bloody Mary, baby?" she asked him.

"I thought you liked me sober."

"I love you sober, and I love Bloody Marys. And I would love for you to make us some drinks and get drunk with me."

He got up and walked towards the bar. "What else would I do on a Sunday?" he asked. He took a bottle of Grey Goose from the freezer and poured two glasses halfway over cubes of ice that he had layered with pepper. He then added a wedge of lime, some Tabasco and Worcestershire sauces, a dash of fajita spice, tomato juice, and an olive to each.

"You could write something."

"Or I could play solitaire for hours. It's more productive."

"Just take a drink and kiss me, you asshole."

So he did.

Her lips were sweet and tangy with a touch of spice that lingered after the kiss along with a shadow of vodka.

"There," he said jokingly, as if he had just done her a favor.

"Good boy," she said, patting him on the head.

He walked back to the table and opened his book. "That's better." He said after reading a few words and taking a sip. "That's the way it's supposed to be read."

Her mind was on the puzzle.

"If you want to live like Hemingway the least you could do is take me someplace," she said after an hour of mutual silence.

"Where? I took you to Key West. Besides, hunting isn't cool anymore, Africa's not safe, and Cuba is restricted."

"What about Spain?" She asked.

"I don't like Anis Del Toro," he answered as he studied the lingering drops hiding beneath the melting ice of his drink. "It tastes like licorice."

"What about Paris?"

"It isn't the same place that he knew. It's like this." He motioned at their view out the window of the Seattle skyline. "It's a puzzle. Cafés and bookstores are now McDonald's and the Gap. Even the museums are like shopping malls."

"I still want to see it," she said.

"You will, baby. Someday." They both looked out at the city.

"I did love Key West. I miss the warm water and sunshine."

"And the humidity?" he asked her.

"Not as much," she answered. "I miss The Blue Heron and passing people I recognized buying books and drinking beer. I want to walk barefoot outside the church like we did on our wedding day."

"And into the sea," he added.

"Yes," she said. "The sea. That's what I want." She stood from the place that she had been sitting on the floor while doing the puzzle and walked to the kitchen. She returned with two glasses and a can of Guinness that she split between them. He kissed her hand as she poured the beer then returned to his reading.

After an hour more he finished "Islands in the Stream", and turned again to the window. He didn't see the city this time, instead he looked

"NOBODY WILL TAKE A STAND...SO THEY FLOCK TO THE EXTREMES WHERE EVERYTHING IS ASSUMED FOR THEM."

at the reflection of himself that seemed somehow absorbed by the sheet of glass that held it, and he thought things that people often do when they stare at their own drunken and unshaven image. He remembered a conversation they had had before on a different Sunday, that was a lot like the one they were enjoying now, only that it had more rain.

"If you must be rich," she had said to him when the subject had never been brought up, "why don't you start by getting a job?"

"Why would you say such a thing?" he responded. "I have no desire to be rich, although I wouldn't turn it down. No, what I want is fame. I want someone to remember me after I die."

"I'll remember you."

"Of course you will. Just don't kill me yet."

It had seemed to him that he should have been bothered by the fact

she assumed he would die before her, but it didn't. It did, however, cause him to write a poem on a piece of scratch paper that he was using as a bookmark. The poem read:

This isn't another poem about love and rainbows,
 this is me, morbid and naked,
 the cleansing of my soul.
 My life under glass,
 viewed on a slide
 would only provide
 my critics with the power to judge
 my actions and regrets,
 their breath would smudge.
 To the man who'll crush my dream,
 I beg you sir to heed my scream,
 bury me by a riverbed,
 but be sure I'm dead..
 be sure I'm dead.

He had been sure at the time that he had created something rather insightful, and if not pretty, at least real.

"Utter crap," he said as he took it from his finished book, read it again, and dropped it to the table. "Everything I write is utter crap."

He glanced at Anna's reflection which was also absorbed through the glass of the window. "Do you know what I wish?" he asked her image, never turning around.

"What's that, dear?"

"That I had something so profound, or meaningful, or down right moving to say that I had to say it twice."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "You say lovely things all of the time."

"I mean the type of thing that you hear in movies or speeches. Words that come out so heavy that they linger inside you for a moment when you hear them before they really sink in, and then just as they do they are repeated slower and softer, pushing the whole phrase to the pit of your stomach. Words that you never forget."

"Do I say things like that?" she asked.

"I'm sure you do Anna, but damn if I remember. Hemingway always found the words. He wrote that whenever he was at a loss he would force himself to write the truest sentence he could, and then follow it with another. I don't even know if I know what that means. The only true sentence that I know is that. 'I'm not sure what that means'. And I could follow it with, 'but I know that everything I write is utter crap'. What's wrong with us? My whole generation is at a loss, and the only true sentence we know is that we don't know."

"Do you remember one night?" she asked, pausing to make sure that he was still listening to her.

"I remember a few." He never took his eyes from the window.

"Good. Do you remember one night long before we married that you whispered in my ear that you were going to marry me?"

"The night I asked you that question?" he replied.

"No, not the night you asked that question. Long before, shortly after we met."

"Were we drunk?"

"I'm sure we were."

"Did you love me?"

"Yes I did."

"No, I can't say that I remember it. Why?"

"No reason," she said. "But you knew that. That was true."

He smiled at her. "That's right, baby. It was."

"And your whole generation isn't lost. It's mine too, and I know where I am."

"I know where you are too," he said watching her in the window. "I didn't say we were lost. I said that we are at a loss. Everything is changing faster everyday, and we couldn't stop it if we wanted to. We are the future, and the future is out of our hands. There is a revolution out there, and we are fighting it in chatrooms armed with cynical apathy."

It was a good conversation she thought. They hadn't talked about anything real in a while and she enjoyed the fact that his voice rose as he continued.

"I just wish that someone would do something. The politicians are still a generation ahead of us, the actors are either supporting the NRA or going vegan. Nobody will take a stand on the individual issues, so they flock to the extremes where everything is assumed for them."

"Why does it have to be politicians or actors?" she asked. "There are other platforms than money."

"That's what I'm talking about baby; fame. They are famous and we want them to tell us how to dress, decorate, shop, and vote. I need to know that Brad Pitt likes my coffee table."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then I'll vote for someone who does. Or I'll go back to IKEA."

"What about writers? I thought they were the conscience of a generation."

"Not today we're not," he said. "The only writer in our generation who has proven to be worth his weight in anything else but bullshit is Douglas Coupland. The rest are at a loss."

"That's rather cynical of you."

"Yes, and I don't care. Do you want another drink?"

"Are you having one?"

"I think so," he said rising from the table.

"I'm okay right now. Perhaps in a bit."

"Suit yourself, baby." He walked to the bar and filled a glass halfway with bourbon. He drank the warm brown liquor down fast and quiet. She wasn't watching and he filled it again, this time to the top.

"Coupland?" she asked. "Which one is he?"

"You know the book in the livingroom, Life After God? The one that everyone looks at, but none will read because they think that it will define them."

"You love that book." She smiled.

"Damn right I love that book. I remember when I first read it. I had stayed a week skiing in Colorado with Barnes, back before he was painting and instead spent all his free time drinking and remembering women. I had read Bukowski non-stop for a month at that point, and when I was through, feeling sufficiently bitter and coarse, I started Coupland's book. I read the entire book from the top of the Rockies to the rivers at the bottom while Barnes drove us home to Arizona."

SEATTLE WAS GOOD ABOUT KEEPING THINGS CONSTANT. A CITY THAT CONSUMES THAT MUCH COFFEE DOESN'T LIKE SURPRISES.

"Did it define you?"

"I don't know," he said, "but it did describe me."

He sat in an empty bar, Von's, waiting for the Mariners to clinch against the White Sox on TV, and spending his time by not thinking about it. Instead he thought about his wife and the things that he longed to tell her while knowing that they were topics that should never be spoken.

She's too damn negative, he thought to himself. She seems to find happiness in complaining, and in doing so she ruins mine. Why can't she glow like she used to? With something good, warm, and secret inside, instead of spreading shadows of negativity like a plague that only fed on him. Some secrets were best left kept.

Some things you just don't talk about, he thought as watched two men and a single heavy-set woman enter the bar, look around, and take seats with clear views of the television. The men each ordered beer and the woman had a cup of coffee with a shot of irish whiskey to keep it warm.

Who loves them? He wondered. Do they smile when they leave bars or do they release their tears in the back of taxicabs and empty hotel rooms? *You don't have to be alone to be lonely,* he thought, unsure if he had heard the phrase somewhere along the way, or if he had coined the words himself.

Another man came in and sat on the stool immediately next to him. He asked the bartender for a pull of beer and a menu. In his maneuvering of the stool he brushed against Jake and mumbled an apology as he fixed his gaze upon the game.

He felt guilty sitting there with his wife out in the shopping mall buying things for him that he didn't need, and being the happiest she had been in a while.

"It's almost like cheating." He said under his breath and then realizing he had done so he glanced at the man next to him. His eyes were still on the TV, and if he had heard he gave no sign of it. Jake looked back down at the shine of the bartop that reflected the light through his glass and the sharp darkness of his eyes hanging over it. *That's what it is though,* he continued in his head. *It's just like cheating if I can't make her happy. But damn if she doesn't complain about every little thing, throwing guilt at me as if it were my fault. I guess it's cheating me too if I let it get me down. But damn if her words aren't heavy.*

And then there were other matters that might just change everything. He looked across the bar at the mirror in which he could see the lines of trees through the window behind him. They were swaying quietly in the wind and rain that were as much a part of his life as anything else. Seattle was good about that. Keeping things constant. A city that consumes that much coffee doesn't like surprises, or even the possibility of them. The streets of Seattle are paved with leaves that have been weighed flat and smooth by the constant pounding of drizzle after drizzle after drizzle. The air floats on clouds of steam from blue collared men and espresso machines, creating a feeling of morning that lingers throughout the day. The nights hide in darkened clubs and cold bottles of micro-brewed beer. People are everywhere. They are from everywhere. Yet they are all

the same. It is as hard to hide in this city as it is to be found. Instead the trees dance to the song of the rain, and all the while the wind leads with gentle arms. The leaves slowly turn from green to the signs of autumn, deep and dull oranges, plums, reds, and yellows. Each falling down of it's own accord once it tires of the constant dance. Ashes to ashes.

Behind the trees he could make out the parade of cars which sped past on Pine street. Passing him, the bar, the shopping center, and the rhythm of the fall, oblivious to everything but their own battles.

"Another Guinness?" asked the bartender. He looked at the empty glass in his hand and answered 'please' with a forced smile. He hadn't even noticed that his glass was empty and while studying it in his hand he noticed that his fingernails, while clear and clean, could stand to be trimmed. He tried to remember when he had done so last. He glanced back at the mirror and realized that his hair was also due.

"Here you go." Said the bartender while setting the pint down on a fresh cardboard coaster and taking away the old one along with the empty glass.

"Thank you," he said as the bartender faded into a conversation with the man on his right about whether or not the Mariners could beat the Yankees in a seven game series. It was the type of conversation that would normally get his interest, and of course he had his own opinions, but for the time it didn't really seem to matter. He sipped his beer and stared at himself in the mirror, oblivious to the dance.

How many cups of coffee would I need to drink before I blended with the masses? He asked himself as it occurred to him that he stood out perhaps a bit too much. *What are the masses of Seattle?* Computer geeks and gays seemed to be the current fad, overshadowing the layman, even quite sadly, the beer makers.

I could wait tables, he thought watching the bartender greet a new couple, but the hard part is the waiting. I couldn't stand the wait. I can't stand the weight. How can she?

His beer had been served in a pint glass. Guinness is actually supposed to be served in a princess glass, which starts like a pilsner at the bottom and bowls out at the mouth. Pretty feminine name for something that holds such a masculine beer. What is it that lets a woman hold a man in

he pondered, his stoutness, his flavor, his being? All the while he thought of her gentle arms wrapped tightly around him. What makes a woman that strong? Maybe princess wasn't such a bad name after all.

She came in with her bags and sat next to him. "Have you been sitting here drinking the whole time?" she asked. "I thought you were looking

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for a job, something to make ends meet? Instead I find you here. Being a drunk doesn't pay well."

He didn't want to argue. He ordered a Manhattan and took an antacid. She was talking of things beyond his control, and making them much more dramatic than they deserved. He came close to interrupting her, but decided against it. Any words from him would only drag out the conversation.

"Could you carry this for me please?" she asked him, pointing towards the large bag that rest against her legs. "What's the score?"

He felt the weight of her bags as he took them from her hands.

"I don't know," he said.

He wasn't sure what time it was when they got home. It was gray outside, and it was always gray. The ground and the clouds had long ago quit fighting over lines of division and had come to an understanding of surrender. Everything was gray and that's the way it was. He imagined a steel wool pad stretched into thin strands and then wrapped repeatedly around his eyes with only enough of an opening for some last lingering glow of light and splashes of rain to get through. It was that gray. And it was cold.

"I'm going to go lie down, kitten," he said as he walked past her towards the bedroom.

She watched him walk down the hall and then she poured herself some whiskey.

"Don't fuck with Ernest Hemingway!" he shouted as he grabbed the book from her grasp. He had been sleeping and at some point she had joined him in bed. She had been writing something in pencil on one of the pages when he opened his eyes.

She bit the back of his shoulder playfully, shaking his flesh slightly in her teeth, as if at any moment she might change her mind and rip it off.

"Damn woman, you got something against drunks?" He reached to the nightstand by turning on his side, put the book down and took a sip from the glass he had left there. She let his skin slide from her lips as she adjusted herself, straddling him atop his lap and pinning him to the bed.

"Don't think that just because you drink like Hemingway that you write like him."

He could feel the bite. "That's cold, baby."

"Honesty's cold, Papa."

"Don't call me that."

She pulled herself across his body to her side of the bed and faced her back to him. The room was quiet and they both listened to the sound of the trains from across the city that only seemed to run at night.

"Hey" he whispered after some time had passed, but she was asleep. He sat up against his pillow with his pen and pad of paper. The trains were quiet now, and he closed his eyes to wait for the next one as the whiskey rolled smoothly across his lips.

The next morning he had crackers with peanut butter along with his coffee for breakfast. She was gone by the time he had gotten up and there wasn't any bread in the house. There wasn't much food period. "Maybe that's what she's doing now," he said to himself as he sat down at his desk and thought about the things that he could write if he ever got around to writing. He stared at his portable Corona number 3 and thought about never going to Paris.

"I'm never going to be a writer," he said as he sat on the edge of the bed. He was drunk and she had just walked in from her doctor's appointment.

"You will and you are," she said facing him while she placed her hands on his shoulders. "You are going to be something else too."

"Let it go, Jig."

She slapped him.

He looked at her mouth as she stood there. She wasn't smiling. Her lips were pursed and her cheeks fell in and out heavily.

She noticed that he had been cleaning his gun. "You shouldn't do that when you've been drinking."

"Why? It's not loaded. I am, but it's not. Do you want a drink, baby?"

"No."

"Hemingway always drank, and his women always drank. I always drink and I thought you would always drink, but now you don't, and I'm not a writer. I'm an idiot." He slurred his words as he rocked slowly back and forth between her outstretched arms.

"Don't say that Jake. You are a great writer. You can drink if you want. You can do whatever you want. Just do what you want." She held him still by his shoulders.

"I want the sea."

"You can't live your life being someone else. That's not your destiny. It was theirs. All it is is bullshit."

"Maybe you're right, baby," he said as he stared into the barrel of the pistol, sliding his thumb along the smooth crescent of the trigger. "Maybe you're right." His words were soft and slow, and they lingered inside her, falling to her stomach even as he fell to her feet.

The shot was quick, and it was clean.

