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ENG 317

Fire Finder

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.
-Mary Oliver*

The spring of my junior year of high school I was more than ready to get out of White Lake, Michigan. For more than a year I had felt like I was on the brink of depression. My classes and environment were uninspiring, and my peers were uninviting. I felt lost, like something was wrong with me for not being able to connect with other people my age. So when my dad told me that he and I were going to Arizona and New Mexico for spring break, my bags were packed in no time at all.

First we were visiting my grandma who lived alone in Arizona. Ever since my grandpa passed away about ten years ago, my dad and his siblings had been traveling 2100 miles west to see their mom as often as they can. I didn't get to see her quite as often, so it was always with open arms and a tear in her eye that my grandmother greeted me at her Arizonian abode. This time, in the fragile state that I was in, I needed a warm welcome. Upon our arrival, my grandma gushed over how grown-up I looked. How my hair was so long. How I had beautiful blue eyes and a nice smile. How I was so sweet and must be beating the boys off with a stick. Usually these types of exaggerated compliments would do nothing but make me blush. This year, I still blushed, but I was glad to hear such kind words.

After I had gotten settled in, I went out to the garage to look through some of my grandpa's old things. Many of his artistic endeavors sat on counters and in boxes in the garage.

He had liked to paint and draw in his free time, and used to send us his latest creations. Hanging in our bathroom are hands holding flowers that he carved out of wood. Poppies, roses and carnations are painted on in bold oranges, reds and blues. Each hand is slightly different from the next, although you have to look carefully to notice. One of the hands is a female hand, with lace at the wrist, and red polish on the nails. After having it in our house for several years, I noticed that one fingernail was unpainted. I could imagine my grandpa becoming distracted by a scorpion in the house, or the howling of a coyote in the distance, and forgetting that he hadn't finished the painting. Perhaps that was what had happened with many of the unfinished paintings lying around the garage.

After digging through several boxes, I found his art supplies: watercolors, oil paints, pastels and brushes. With my grandma's permission, I took the watercolors outside and began painting. I had taken up drawing when I was younger, but dropped the hobby when I became interested in boys and bugs in middle school. Sitting on the sunny porch, using my grandpa's old paintbrushes, something lost sparked inside me. Although my painting skills were lacking, it felt good to express myself again. After keeping myself closed off, in fear of showing how unhappy I was, I realized that I had been stifling my creativity. What had happened to the little girl that wrote silly stories about hands made of blueberries and frogs as big as bears? Feeling inspired, I began painting landscapes filled with animals of unnatural proportions. With each stroke of the brush, I felt like I was releasing a weight. It was liberating to see my thoughts turning into something physical. Once I had finished one picture, I couldn't stop. Soon I was surrounded by sheets of paper drying on the table.

As the sun rose higher, and the day grew hotter, I became distracted by quails and cardinals visiting the bird feeder. The quails looked regal strutting across the rocks with their

black masks and plumes. I watched as a male diligently followed a female across the top of the wall surrounding the pool. The chickadees vied for positions at the feeder, and I rooted silently for the underdog, hoping he would find a place among the others. He hesitated, hopping across the ground until the larger birds had gone away. When a spot opened up, I willed the timid chickadee to take the opportunity, and rejoiced when he did. I shifted my attention to a cardinal; he was a regular, sure to be perched on the same bush at the same time each morning. I don't know much about bird behavior, but I wondered why he wasn't off finding a mate or building a nest. In my mind, he noticed my everyday presence in the same lawn chair, and found solace in my predictability, as I did in his. I became so transfixed with the birds' world that the sound of the porch door opening startled me when my dad called me inside for dinner.

The next morning, as the sun bathed the sky in shades of pink and purple, my dad and I packed my grandma's blue Ford Focus in preparation for our next destination: New Mexico. We were going to visit my uncle, Mark, who I hadn't seen in six years. My grandma, not thrilled by the idea of sitting in a car for six hours, decided to stay behind. After filling the car with junk food and reading materials, we said our goodbyes and backed out of the driveway.

You'd be surprised how quickly six hours driving on a straight, desert road goes by. Before we knew it, we were driving through Gila National Forest to meet Mark. He works for the US Forest Service as a forest fire lookout, and we were going to spend the night at his lookout tower. The park covers three million acres of the southwestern corner of New Mexico, and contains a very diverse abundance of wilderness; the Chihuahuan Desert, the Sonoran Desert, the Rocky Mountains, the Great Plains, the Mexican Plateau, the Great Basin, and the Sierra Madre all come together there. Because there is such a variety of habitats, a wide array of

wildlife inhabits the Gila. My dad and I fantasized about seeing a mountain lion, Rocky Mountain mule deer, turkey, black bear, or Javelina, all of which live in the area.

Several miles into the woods, we spotted Mark standing outside of his Jeep on the side of the dirt trail we had been driving along. As we stepped out of the car, I could tell he was trying to comprehend the change of his niece from ten year old to teenager. He wasn't the I-Remember-When-You-Were-This-Big type. He gave my dad and me quick hugs and, without delay, told us to follow him to the tower. We drove behind him as he sped down the narrow, windy, dirt trails of the forest.

"You can tell he's driven out here a few times," said my dad with a chuckle. Tall pines blurred together out of the corner of my eyes as we tried to keep up. Dirt kicked up from the Jeep's wheels, leaving us squinting through the clouds of dust. After a few miles of this maniacal driving, we arrived at the thirty foot tall tower. The tower was one of ten in the forest, each of which were placed at the highest points in the forest. On top of every tower rested a small, wooden cabin. Mark's tower sat in the middle of a clearing, with a rickety old outhouse and a small camper nearby. As we headed towards the steel rungs of the tower, my dad and Mark began casually catching up on life. I, on the other hand, was staring up at the tower, envisioning a slip of the foot, and a thirty foot fall. Not wanting my uncle to think I had turned into a big scaredy-cat though, I silently followed him to the first step. I hadn't been aware of even the slightest breeze on ground, but by the time we got to the middle of the tower, I became very aware of every wisp of wind. The slightest breeze was enough to sway the large, steel monster, as if it were a scrawny twig. I held my breath as we neared the top of the teetering tower.

When there were no more steps ahead of me, I lifted my eyes, and let out something

between a sigh and a gasp. What I saw was beautiful. From the top of the tower, a majority of the Gila's three million acres spread out before your eyes. The mountains below us looked more like rolling hills. Deep shades of green drowned my vision. At this height the Gila looked deceptively homogeneous; pine, spruce and aspen became one a sea of green. I had been on the Great Lakes before and seen the seemingly endless stretches of water, but never had I experienced that with a forest. Nothing obstructed my view of the bright blue sky, spotted with cottony, white clouds. Mark was silent as he let us take in the view.

“Not bad, huh?” he finally said.

We were still standing outside of the cabin, on a sort of wrap-around porch, so Mark led us inside to see his “office.” The cabin was wooden, and had wall-to-wall windows on all sides. It was a simple room, no more than twenty-four square feet; just enough room for a countertop, refrigerator, small table, and a “firefinder”. Mark explained the equipment in the middle of the room. He said that the firefinder was similar to an engineer's transit and measured a fire's vertical bearing and azimuth. His technical jargon went over my head. I was still soaking up the panoramic view. It was easy to see the appeal in being a lookout. Beauty, adventure, wilderness, alone time; what more could you ask for? Mark opened the fridge, and offered us refreshments. I laughed to myself when I saw that three quarters of it was filled with beer. Clearly, life as a lookout was incredibly demanding.

After Mark showed us around, we began preparing our dinner. I had assumed we'd be eating your typical, moderately satisfying camping food, but I was mistaken. The scent of fresh air was quickly replaced by that of a barbeque. My dad and Mark cooked steaks on a small, portable grill while I prepared a salad with vegetables Mark brought from his home garden. With the three of us in such a small space, our plates balanced on the table's edges and our

elbows bumped together. We were confined, but cozy. Once we were settled, the inquisition began. Mark asked about school and what I did for fun— all of the questions an uncle was supposed to ask. He also asked about the music I listened to and books I read— easier questions that I was glad to answer. Of course, my dad took advantage of the question-asking opportunity and tried to squeeze out anything I had to say about boys; a futile attempt. Thankfully, discussion finally shifted to my brother, and I was able to busy myself eating. As the conversation wound down, we sat and watched the sun begin its slow descent. The sky became a mural of bright colors; a sight we could see no matter which way we turned. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a small flash of light in the distance. I walked to the window to get a better look and saw that several miles away, a storm was forming over the mountains. It was a looming gray mass with a blurry sheet of rain coming down beneath it. Every few seconds, a stream of purple-white lightning broke through the haze. From this viewpoint, the thunderstorm was pretty, almost delicate. Our distance from the storm muted the sound of the thunder. Every few seconds, the lightning danced downward, then quickly retreated. As a whole, it looked like a living creature. Maybe a jellyfish or an octopus.

“That’ll probably hit us in a couple hours,” Mark said. “You should be fine up here though.”

My dad glanced at me, “You want to sleep in here?”

“Is that... safe?” I asked.

Mark assured us that he had slept through many storms in the tower, and there was no danger in doing so; there was a lightning rod held down by copper wire on top of the cabin. I wasn’t completely convinced, but was excited by the idea of sleeping so high off of the ground, surrounded by wildlife, so I gave them the go ahead to bring up the sleeping bags.

After Mark set my dad and me up for our night in the tower, he headed downstairs. He was sleeping in the camper below to give us more room. Tired from a day of driving, we quickly zipped ourselves into the sleeping bags and said goodnight.

I awoke to the sound of thunder clapping, and wind howling. The cabin leaned in the strong gusts, and lit up for fleeting seconds when lightning struck. One flash revealed my dad's silhouette, standing at the window, watching nature's performance.

"Cool, huh?" he said upon hearing me rustle into a sitting position.

We watched the storm in silence. Rain pelted down onto the roof and against the windows. The water blurred the view of the landscape. Suddenly I wished I had my grandpa's paints; I could imagine painting a mess of gray, with splashes of bright colors darting across the paper. Being in such a small space, so close to the source of the storm, I felt vulnerable. Every flash of lightning revealed my presence, every drop of rain reminded me that I was outnumbered, and every clap of thunder told me that I was overpowered. I lied back down on the hard floor of the cabin, and stared out the windows in fear and awe. The cabin continued to rock back and forth, until I could no longer keep my eyes open. Colors flashed beneath my eyelids as I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, there was a wonderful calm. I went out onto the steel veranda and held onto the railing. The cabin was still. The sky was clear. Silence surrounded us. The night's beautiful chaos seemed like an impossibility. It was as if we had been suspended in the air, at the mercy of the storm. Thinking about how fragile my life felt in that tower reminded me of all the other creatures who experienced the same storm, unsheltered. I realized that I was not alone; I was living beneath the same sky as all of the deer, elk and peccary of Gila National

Forest. They had felt across their skin the same wind that whirled past the tower. They heard the rumbles and cracks of thunder and saw the brilliant lightning illuminate the sky. Surely they had been aware of the fragility of their lives as well.

Later that day, Mark led us to his house in the small town of Pinos Altos. While dinner cooked, we sat outside and stared out at the same forest we had been overlooking just a few hours earlier. Now we could hear the birds singing and the bees buzzing. The pine trees loomed over our heads, and mountains rose up in the distance out of the darkening blue sky. I rocked back and forth in my chair and let my thoughts wander. For the past two years I had been stuck inside myself. I wasn't happy. I had become dull and inert, and because of that, I had lost my creativity and passion for learning. Reflecting on the trip though, I came to realize that there is so much to be inspired by in nature. I saw the vastness of the forest, which contained animals of all habits and sizes. I saw the sun melt into the sky, blending its colors flawlessly. I felt the rhythm of the pouring rain and heard the beat of the thunder. I realized that I had a choice; I could isolate myself from nature's marvels, and continue on in the lull that I was in, or I could immerse myself in them, finding joy and wonder in each new discovery.

A soft humming sound brought me out of my thoughts. I looked straight ahead to see a group of about ten Calliope hummingbirds hovering around a feeder five feet away. They are the smallest hummingbirds in North America, and their name means beautiful voice. Their backs are a shimmering emerald green and their bellies white. As they flitted back and forth, their pink throats facing me, I felt a sense of urgency, as if they were calling me; showing me my place in the world.

