

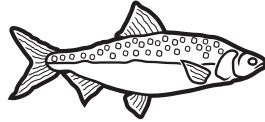
whitefish review

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Easter on the Prairie

I find no beauty in Montana.

I don't even find any beauty in horses.

Myers Reece

Fiction

Even before we ran out of gas on a remote, prairie back road, my girlfriend had already suspected I was lost in more ways than one. I thought she might be right. It had been eight years since I last returned home to visit my mother, who still lived in the same rotting ranch house where I grew up on the barren, eastern-Montana plains. When I called her from Minneapolis before I left, she coughed loudly into the phone and said, “Eight years isn’t that long. You’re always so dramatic.” All I had said was, “You know, I haven’t visited since my last year in college, eight years ago.” I didn’t think I was being dramatic.

But my siblings had been nagging me to visit, even if their eagerness hadn’t rubbed off on my mother. My brother and sister, older by eight and nine years, never left Montana and lived in nearby towns, which meant they saw our mother too frequently and wanted me to come home so she would have something else to complain about for awhile. Once when I was 12 or 13, she stood up at the dinner table clutching a glass of melted ice water and vodka, her broad-shouldered Norwegian frame swaying precariously, and explained the large age discrepancy between the siblings by describing me as a “surprise—you know, a whoops-a-daisy.”

After my father died when I was a freshman in college, I came to view my childhood home as not only depressing but eerie, and I grew wary of even stepping inside, much less staying there for a vacation. It didn’t help that my mother refused to change anything in the house or make any other effort to create new memories. During college, I would return on holidays to find my retainer from high school sitting in the medicine cabinet exactly where I left it, next to long-expired pills I had gotten after my wisdom teeth were pulled. I was fully expecting to find the retainer and pills still there this time, too. Trapped in a place

where time stands still, I could understand why my mother didn't blink at the thought of eight years.

"I guess this whole 'sightseeing' thing works better when there's gas in the tank," Molly said, making exaggerated quotation mark gestures with her fingers. We were standing in the cold and staring at the car, and her comment struck me as pointlessly obvious and mean. But I couldn't blame her for being irritable. I had been irritable for much of the road trip, but I figured since we had come all this way, why not show her around a little? Many of my fondest adolescent memories were from cruising the prairie back roads with friends, drinking beer, shooting guns, talking about girls. Why not show her those back roads?

"You actually seemed to be enjoying yourself until this happened," I reasoned, which she didn't deny. We'd been together for five years, living together in a Minneapolis apartment for three of those years, but she still didn't really understand where I came from. She was a city girl, born and raised in the Bay Area, and eastern Montana may as well have been Mongolia. She admitted she was curious to see my roots, though she was anticipating a wholly unpleasant experience, based on my descriptions of home and phone conversations with mom. She had also chastised me, prophetically, for not getting the faulty fuel gauge on our aging Subaru fixed before we left. The trip seemed to her like a doomed mission from the beginning.

"I hate to say it, baby, but we have to start walking." I braced for her icy glare, but we were already past that point. "There's a little town not far away. If this would have happened somewhere else out here, there might not be anybody around for miles and miles. We actually got lucky."

She clearly disagreed with my definition of lucky, but it was true. A one-bar, no-gas station town, just a short jaunt away, was the only civilization for many miles. It would be getting dark soon and I knew the Prairie Rose—the lone watering hole in the area—would be filling up with Friday night regulars. I figured somebody there would be able to help us. My mother was out of the question since she had called everyone in the family a few years ago to tell us that she was too blind and too scared to keep driving. She no longer owned a car and depended on rural neighborliness to get around and purchase

essentials—namely tonic water, vodka and cigarettes. And I had made a habit of never asking my siblings for anything, a habit I didn't intend to break unless absolutely necessary.

Molly smiled warmly at me, which filled me with relief. She was like that: abrasive and short-tempered at times, but reasonable and loving when it counted. I took her hand in mine and we began marching across the plains, the soggy post-thaw grass squishing under our feet. I called my mother from my cell phone to tell her we'd be late and she said, "I didn't think you were coming until tomorrow. That's fine, I guess. But if it's too late, don't wake me up. The bed in your room is made."

We reached the Prairie Rose as dusk was settling into the sky. Inside the bar, two handsome older couples were already on the dance floor, moving to the jukebox sounds of George Strait. The men wore crisp flannel button-up shirts with Wranglers and cowboy boots. The women both had flower patterns on their dresses, which rippled and twirled when their partners spun them. Molly stared at them, smiling and softly moving her hips with the music.

"I like it here."

"This is what you call the lifeblood of a community, or actually a few communities. I used to come here and eat burgers while my parents got drunk. Then I'd drive them home." I paused to reflect. "I actually drove on that same road we were on. Our headlights would be the only sign of life."

This was meant to be more informative than nostalgic, but Molly said, "That sounds beautiful."

"Bar up," I said, pointing her in the direction of two empty barstools. I thought it would be rude to start asking for help in a place like this until we ordered something. And I felt silly in our bright Patagonia coats, but the only reactions we got were pleasant nods and waves.

"What'll it be?" the bartender asked us. She was probably in her sixties and I figured I must have known her, though I couldn't place her.

"I want what they're having," Molly answered, gesturing toward one of the couples on the dance floor.

The bartender glanced at them and then back at us. “That’ll be whiskey on the rocks for the cowboy,” she said to me before looking at Molly, “and a Bud Light for the cowgirl. Sound about right?”

“That does,” Molly said.

“We don’t take credit cards or out-of-state checks,” she said, tersely. “Policy.”

“We’ve got cash,” I said, suddenly feeling as awkward about our age as our shiny jackets. I didn’t see anyone under forty in the bar.

As we sipped our drinks, a grizzled old man in a beat-up cowboy hat sat down next to me. He was the only person there who hadn’t bothered to throw on clean clothes; his jeans were streaked with something greenish-brown that quickly identified itself to my nose as cow shit, and his flannel shirt had the kind of assorted mystery stains that any bachelor can relate to, regardless of geography. Molly leaned back to look behind me at the source of the new odors. She crinkled her nose and then swiveled on her stool to watch the dancing couples again.

“Haven’t seen you around here before.” The old man’s voice was as gruff as his face.

“I grew up around here but haven’t been back for a long time. My girlfriend and I drove from Minneapolis to see my mother for Easter.”

“Long drive.”

“We wanted to make a road trip out of it,” I said, but Molly coughed deliberately. “I guess *I* wanted to make a road trip out of it.”

The old man sized up Molly, who was attractive and fit in her early thirties, decked out in a purple fleece, tight designer jeans and shoes that clearly weren’t built for ranching. I could tell his gaze was making her uncomfortable, and it lasted just long enough to make me a little uncomfortable, too.

“Bet you didn’t come all this way to have him drag you out to a bar?” He grinned at Molly. She was reluctant to engage him in conversation, but answered after a pause.

“We ran out of gas. He wanted to show me the ‘sights’ around here, and this was the only place within walking distance.” She did those exaggerated finger quotation marks again and I knew she had slipped out of sweet, loving Molly mode into bitter, sarcastic Molly mode.

“So who’s your mom?” he asked me.

“Margaret Thompson.”

“You’re Marge’s son? You must be the youngest. What’s your name again?”

“Andrew, but everyone calls me Drew. This is Molly.”

“My name’s Terry. Pleased to meet you.”

Terry had what looked like a triple or quadruple whiskey on the rocks in a pint glass. I didn’t hear him order a drink, so I assumed the bartender just brought him his usual. His hands looked like they could crush the glass. He was probably pushing eighty but he could no doubt take me in an arm wrestling match, or any other match that involved strength. I looked down at my soft, city hands and felt self-conscious.

“So I’m guessing you’re looking for someone with a gas can or someone who’d be willing to drive you down the highway to a gas station?”

“You’re guessing right, although we’d be more than happy to deal with it tomorrow if there’s a place around here to spend the night.”

Molly kicked me in the leg and her eyes narrowed.

“We’d much rather get out of here tonight, though,” she said. “We can pay for the gas and more for the trouble.”

“How about you just buy me a drink and then we can swing by my place to get some gas. Then I’ll take you to your car. I got a lot of machines that guzzle a lot of gas—tractors, backhoes, trucks—so I got a lot of gas cans laying around.”

“That’d be great,” I said, but Terry was staring at Molly. She gave him a nervous smile and then turned to the dancing couples. Once again, he stared a bit too long for my liking, too.

“Ah, forget about the drink. Let’s just get out of here so we can get you on the road. Your mother’s probably in knots.”

“I’m sure she’s hanging in there.”

“Let me take a leak and we’ll head out,” Terry said.

When he rounded the corner to the bathroom, Molly grabbed my arm.

“Let’s ask somebody else to help us. I don’t want to go to his house at all. He’s creeping me out.”

“He’s just a lonely old man who hasn’t seen a pretty girl in awhile.”

“I’m glad you’re so comfortable with me being old man eye-candy.”

“I’m not comfortable with it, but I’m just saying that’s all it is.”

“I don’t know. It’s not just the staring. Can’t we just ask someone else?”

“Not at this point. He’s already offered. He’s being nice. Let’s just do this and be on our way.”

Molly gave me the “we’ll-talk-about-this-later” glare as Terry returned from the bathroom. On top of being angry, though, she was visibly nervous.

“You two lovebirds ready?”

By the fourth time Terry’s truck veered off the dirt road’s higher ground and into the deep ruts that he was trying to avoid, I realized he was drunker than I had imagined. I was riding in the cab’s middle seat so Molly didn’t have to be next to him, and each time the truck tires dipped into the ruts I bounced hard enough to drive my shoulders into both Molly and Terry on each side of me. Molly clutched the door handle with her right hand and my jeans with her left. Her nails dug into my leg. After one of the biggest bounces, her eyebrows shot halfway up her forehead and didn’t drop back down into place until she closed her eyes, which she did the rest of the way. Terry, on the other hand, was having a good time.

“This road’s bumpy as hell, I’ll tell you!” he hooted. We were going forty on a road more suited for ten or fifteen. It suddenly occurred to me that Terry might be a maniac, a possibility that had no doubt occurred to Molly back at the bar. Here we were, traveling at white-knuckle speeds, so far out in the prairie that the whole world was beginning to feel empty. I had never been so relieved to see a porch light, but even when we slowed to go down his driveway, Molly didn’t seem any less frightened—maybe more. Terry was having a blast.

“That ain’t how you drive in the city, is it?”

I saw what Terry meant about having a lot of machines, though the cars and tractors littering his property didn’t look like they needed gas; it looked like they hadn’t been operational for years, maybe decades. All around us, hulking metal carcasses lay silhouetted against the starry horizon. One gutted pickup sported a “no trespassing” sign that declared: “If you can see this, I can see you in my rifle sights.” I tried to

pivot Molly in a different direction, but it was too late. She was wide-eyed and looked ready to run. Terry put his hand on her shoulder.

“It’s all right, little lady. Just some country boy humor. Come on, let’s have a beer inside before I scrounge up a gas can for you.”

The invitation wasn’t posed as a question, so I did my best impersonation of a confident man and took Molly by the hand as we followed Terry through the front door.

Inside the house, a musty stench filled my nostrils. When Terry flipped on the living room light, I could see that the house was littered with random junk and trash: stacks of newspapers and magazines, candy wrappers, beer cans, an out-of-place golf ball here and there, all of it scattered on the floor, the couch, the coffee table, the dining room table, the kitchen counter. Terry cleared two boxes of papers off the couch onto the ground and motioned for us to sit down.

“Sorry about the mess. I don’t get a lot of company.”

Terry returned from the kitchen with three Natural Lights, a beer I remember my father drinking after a long day working the fields or running cattle. Molly eyed the beer suspiciously before taking a sip. After that car ride, I was ready for a beer. I took two big gulps. Terry took three and stared at Molly until she fidgeted uncomfortably. Then he turned to me.

“You know, your dad was a good man,” he said.

“I figured you might have known him. It seems like everybody knows everybody else within a fifty-mile radius out here.” I was relieved to have a conversation like that, to normalize what was becoming an increasingly odd evening. Molly even seemed to relax a bit.

“I got to know him when I leased some grazing land from him a long time ago. Bumped into him at the bar now and then, too.”

Terry saw Molly trying to covertly read an open notebook on the floor. He walked over and picked it up.

“Go ahead and give it a read. It’s my daughter’s diary. I leave it open on that page because it pretty near sums up how she felt about this place.”

Terry lightly shook the beer in his hand to gauge its contents and then took a smaller sip.

“Breaks my heart that she wouldn’t come home because she hated

home so much. I should've done more to make this place inviting. I should've done more to show her why I love this part of the world so much. I just should've done more."

Terry had been talking to neither of us in particular, but now he was facing Molly.

"I'd actually appreciate it if you read that out loud. Just that one entry: August 18, 1992."

Molly hesitated, staring at the diary before sneaking a furtive, questioning peek at me. I offered nothing, so she held the diary up and started reading.

I find no beauty in Montana. I don't even find any beauty in horses. They are pests that buck me off when I'm trying to get use out of them and die as soon as I finally grow fond of them. Nor are ranches sanctuaries for those who wish to dedicate their souls and energy to the land. They are desolate hellholes where dreams die and some of the hardest-working people in the world grow tired and bitter, never reaping the benefits they so undoubtedly deserve. No, my Montana is not the Montana of everyone's dreams. It's not a gorgeous landscape painting, bristling with lush timber-covered mountains and trout-filled streams running through the backyards of people who picnic with their nearest neighbors on beds of wildflowers. My Montana is more emptiness than any girl should endure, plains that reach every horizon and are dotted with sagebrush, the occasional herd of God's stupidest creatures—cows—and full of antelope that run at highway speeds but rarely need to because nothing ever happens. And that's during the nicest summer months.

Molly stared at the diary for a few seconds before setting it back on the floor, still open to that page. His daughter's words could have been my own, describing my own tortured relationship with the land I once called home, the land that I had taken nearly a decade to get back to, the land that his daughter apparently never did get back to.

"She has a way with words," Molly said to break the silence.

"Yeah, she did."

He looked at Molly, again seeming to study her. But this time, I could see what I hadn't before. Behind him, a dozen framed photographs of his daughter were clustered ceremoniously on the wall, like a shrine. They spanned from when she was a baby to what looked

like her late twenties or early thirties—my age, Molly’s age—but then stopped. And in the last photo, the young woman wore a purple fleece that looked a lot like the one on the young woman sitting next to me. I noticed Molly also studying the photos. The look on her face was no longer one of fear, but now something closer to sadness.

“Well, should we go get that gas can?” Terry said as he crushed an empty beer can in his hands.

As Terry headed outside, Molly took my hand and kissed me softly on the lips. On our way toward the door, I glanced at the pretty girl in the photos and then at my girlfriend. Molly had never seemed so beautiful in all the years I had known her.

Outside, Terry rustled around in a shed before emerging with two gas cans.

“This should be more than enough to get you to a gas station.”

The drive from Terry’s house was far calmer than the one to it. He drove at a reasonable speed, without talking, and he avoided the ruts much better, his drunkenness shifting from full-throated rowdiness to subdued concentration. This time, Molly sat in the middle.

When we got to our car, I emptied both cans into the tank, fired up the engine and then shook Terry’s hand. Molly gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. His smile brought light to that dark prairie. He offered to follow us to make sure we got to the gas station, but I told him the two cans were plenty. I knew how far the nearest gas station was.

We watched Terry drive off, back to his house, back to a place, like my childhood home, where time stood still. I gripped the steering wheel, which felt cold but comforting. Once again, in my hands I held the power to leave.