

The Oval

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 5

2010

Shades of Blue

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Recommended Citation

Mikeson, Claire (2010) "Shades of Blue," *The Oval*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol3/iss1/5>

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The letter finally came last week, crisp and important with ink script addresses, not the smeary pen kind. My name was on the front, looking significant like it never had before. Adele Edwards, 42 Birch Street, Ashland, KS 67831. I've lived in Ashland since I was five. A few years back the town committee made a website claiming that Ashland is the treasure at the end of Dorothy's rainbow. But they're lying. Ashland is more like Oz—where Dorothy sure as hell did not want to get stranded, by the way—but with fewer crystal palaces, and Protestants and cows instead of witches and munchkins. And the only place my red stilettos ever got me is four blocks down to The Cove where I bartended five nights a week for the last four years, trying to save up some money for art school. All my life I felt chained to Ashland, but I guess I just never had a reason to leave before. Now I have this envelope, buckled up and riding shotgun in my pickup. Inside is the letter and that little blue button I plucked off Rick's shirt the night he fell asleep drunk on the bar stool, quiet snores escaping from those chapped, smoky lips of his.

In the window of The Cove, there's a neon sign of a mermaid, which I always thought was pretty stupid since the only mermaids who would ever want to come to Kansas are obviously suicidal. The Cove is one of those dim-lit, second-rate bars that serve second-rate food. Hearts and profanities etched with pocketknives adorn the dark, lacquered wood of the bar table, and the walls' greasy bricks are covered in dried beer splashes, full of cigarette smoke. A few of my napkin sketches of old alcoholics, along with the typical beer and sports posters, cover mortar cracks in the wall. Most of the customers are faithful regulars—the old, carousing rancher types that live right outside Ashland—or people just passing through town. Tuesday nights are usually pretty slow, and it was one of those slow Tuesdays in June three months ago when Rick came in. I'd never seen him in The Cove before, so I assumed I'd never see him again. He was just another displaced fifty-something straggler with a pickup and nowhere to be. I guessed The Cove was as good a place as any.

He grabbed the bar stool with a tan, lean arm and pulled it to him. “You don't look like a god-damned mermaid,” he said with a half-smirk, his rain-gray eyes glinting through narrowed lids.

I don't have time for this, I thought. “Can I get you a beer?” I asked him. He didn't need one.

I smelled the faint sweat and loneliness; he smelled like all the rest of them. Seeing them makes something squeeze my heart. Uncomfortable, but not so much that I black out from the pain. Not so much that I don't understand. They walk in, have too much to drink, and walk out, leaving that unfading, sad-man imprint on your brain. On some occasions they spank you, if they've got enough beer in their blood. Some share fragments of their stories, but they never complete them. I didn't think Rick would be any different.

He remembered me when he came back a couple weeks later. I informed him that my name was in fact Adele, not "Mermaid." He informed me that his name was Rick Makela and that he was from Wyoming. He'd been staying at a motel here in Ashland, and I figured he'd spent the past few weeks sampling every one of the local bars. When I asked him about it later though, he wouldn't admit it. I guess he thought I'd think he was a traitor to The Cove. We talked for over an hour that night. It was a Friday; they're not as slow as Tuesdays. Pam was managing that night, working on inventory, and she told me to quit flirting with the customers and do my damned job. I listened to Rick instead.

"Ever been to the ocean?" he asked me after a moment of silence. His eyes grew hazy as he stared at the glowing mermaid swimming in her window glass cage.

"No. God, I wish! We're right in the middle of the whole damned country, Rick."

"I know. But I'd a' guessed you would have anyway. You swear like a sailor." The corners of his mouth turned up, revealing dimples under his silver whiskers. His teeth glittered in the bar light. "I've been there," he went on. "Me and Gabe went in Oregon a few summers ago. We saw the biggest damned jellyfish washed up on the sand. We poked it with a stick, and then I licked the goddamned thing! Gabe dared me to. Haven't turned down a dare in my life, and I wasn't about to in front of Gabe."

"Who's Gabe?" I asked him.

"Don't ask so many questions, Mermaid." He smiled at me again, but his eyes didn't.

I couldn't sleep that night, so I sat down at my canvas and painted the ocean. Or at least what I thought the ocean should look like. Sabrina stumbled into our apartment at three in the morning.

"Del, guess who I just slept with! It was Derek!" Apparently she couldn't wait for me to guess. I didn't know who I was going to pick

anyway. Sabrina's gorgeous—she's got quite the selection.

I laughed, "Do you think you got pregnant this time?" Sabrina goes through phases. The past month had been all about Lolita. She made us read it together. This month it was babies.

"I don't know, but I'm crossing my fingers. Our baby would be so freaking cute!" She pulled back her long blonde hair and noticed the canvas I was working on. "Hey, that one's really pretty Del! I like that surreal color of the water. But I've been to the ocean before; it's never that color in real life." Everyone's been to the ocean but me.

Two nights later, I saw Rick again. He staggered into The Cove, and the smell of alcohol greeted me before he did. He looked like he hadn't showered in a day or two; his thick, blonde hair was uncombed and grease stains spotted his ratty tee shirt. He straddled the bar stool and lit a cigarette. Slowly, deliberately he formed his lips into a circle and blew the smoke in my face. Without flinching, I breathed the slow-swirling cloud into my lungs. When he had sucked the cigarette down to a stub he pressed its orange ember end into the bar table, burning a black cinder circle into the middle of an, I love Sammy. He lifted his eyes to mine, and his voice finally filled the silence.

"Get me a beer."

I looked into those icy eyes. Purple circle shadows hung beneath them. I paused for a minute, thinking. "On one condition," I told him.

"Oh yeah, and what's that?"

"You promise to tell me your story."

He looked at me for a few seconds. "My story?" he asked. "Jesus Christ, I don't have a god damned story." I didn't believe him. I waited. "Fine," he finally said and then paused. "Mermaid, don't you got a boyfriend or something?"

I smiled. "I don't need one, Rick. Not when I've got all these lovely old alcoholics to choose from." I gestured around the bar. A solitary man sat in a table in the corner; he picked his nose and rubbed it on his dirty jeans. Then, noticing our gaze upon him, he snorted, slurred the words, "What're you lookin' at?" and took a swig from his bottle.

"Suit yourself," Rick said. "Now beer me." He cracked his first smile of the night. Probably the first of the whole damn day.

Rick continued his stops at The Cove, coming a few nights each week. He kept his promise, and each night he fed me his memories. I was ravenous. I thrived on those bits of him, strung piece by tattered piece through the dingy bar nights. On slow nights when Rick

had the jukebox to himself he would always play Johnny Cash. I learned every last word to “Sunday Morning Coming Down,” and not by choice. One night when I was closing Rick made me sing it with him. His deep, drunken baritone resonated through the little bar. When he was telling his stories he always told me to keep the beers coming; I guess they helped the words slip out easier.

Rick was born in Wyoming. I guess that’s all he meant when he’d told me he was “from Wyoming” because he had spent most of his life in no place in particular. A lot of his first stories started with, “Mermaid, you ever been to...” Nine times out of ten I hadn’t.

“Mermaid, you ever been to Yellowstone?” he asked me one night. “When I was eleven I jumped clear across a hot pot! Burnt the god damned rubber right off my shoes!” Sometimes I think he just made the stories up. He’d always look at me with the crease of a smile creeping along those thin, dark cheeks, waiting for a laugh. I never could tell.

Most of his stories were like that for a while, but when he thought I’d forgotten about the mysterious Gabe, or maybe that I just didn’t care, he let the name slip a few times. But I hadn’t forgotten.

At first, Rick told me all those little, insignificant bits in a life, those frozen picture memories. I laughed at the pieces, told with those enthusiastic eyes in a way only Rick could tell them. It’s too damn bad eyes can’t always look like that, like Rick’s did when he was telling a story. I guess in the end all those bits add up to something bigger, but who the hell knows what: the swimming pool in Texas where he tried all summer long to do a double back flip off the diving board; his first pickup, a red ‘65 Chevy, where he lost his virginity to Cynthia Smith in the front seat; the cheap, old restaurant in Korea he and his friends ate at everyday for a year while he was in the army.

I’d never painted so much in my life. I could smell the chlorine of that Texas pool, hear Cynthia panting in that old red pickup, touch the crumbling walls of the run-down Korean restaurant. Every night I had something to frame, and Rick’s stories took up their places among my previous works; they grew to cover an entire wall of my bedroom. Every story Rick told gave me another picture.

On days when Sabrina and I had nothing to do I’d retell her Rick’s stories. I guess she kept me sane this summer by listening to all my secondhand stories and making all those stupid jokes of hers. I sort of hoped the stories would give her something to obsess about too, besides babies.

“What’d the old drunk tell you today, Del?” She asked with a red lip-gloss smile as I worked on Rick’s most recent memory. Sabrina had seen him in The Cove one night when she’d stopped by to say hi on her way back to the apartment. Ever since, she’d been calling him ‘the old drunk’ or ‘Humbert Humbert,’ “The post-pedophilia Humbert I mean, after he sees Lolita pregnant and happy without him,” she’d told me. “That’s what I think he looks like.” I don’t give that girl enough credit.

Some nights Sabrina would look at my canvas or sketchbook and give me her own ridiculous rendition of Rick’s story before I told her the real one. I think she always liked her versions better.

I finished telling her about the restaurant story, and she let out a tiny sigh as she stared at the picture a minute longer. Finally, she said, “I’m going to bed Del. I’m exhausted.” She started towards her room then stopped. “Oh yeah, did you get the letter yet?” She asked me with wide, eager eyes, tapping her long polished finger on the doorframe.

“Not yet,” I told her. “Night, Sabrina.” I had been trying not to think about the letter.

The next night the Gabe stories began to bubble up from some hidden spot inside of Rick, and they didn’t stop. I’d always ask, and for those first few stories I’d always get the same answer: “Don’t ask so many questions, Mermaid.” It drove me nuts hearing all about the faceless, ageless Gabe and still not knowing who he was. Then one night Rick finally told me. I guess he had to tell someone. Some secrets are just too bitter; they burn their way out of you.

“Mermaid, did I ever tell you about the time me and Gabe rode them roller-coasters up in Coney Island?” He asked me. He looked down at his beer and let out a laugh as he shook his head. “God, I ‘bout shit my pants, but I’ve never seen Gabe smile so big in my whole damn life.”

“Jesus, Rick,” I said with an impatient edge. “Who’s Gabe?”

He looked at me with his gray, glazy alcohol eyes for a minute then back down at his beer bottle, like he was expecting it to answer for him. Finally his lips parted. His eyes found mine, and he said faintly, in that raspy cigarette voice of his, “Gabe was my son.”

During the next couple of weeks, Rick pieced together the rest of his story, slowly, so I could understand. He didn’t have a secret to keep anymore, at least not one that mattered. Four summers ago, when they learned Gabe was sick, Rick took him on a cross-country road trip. They started in Wyoming, where Rick was born, and went

“everywhere you want to go when you’re a kid.” Knowing who Gabe was gave Rick’s stories more meaning; I finally understood the quiver in his voice he’d get sometimes behind that magnetic smile, the obscure frozen hardness you saw every once in a while in those eyes that had watched a child die.

“See this shirt Mermaid?” he asked me one night. “I got it in Montana. Gabe picked it out, said it made me look like a cowboy.” He smiled. The shirt was two shades of blue with shiny buttons down the front, and it did make him look like a cowboy. He took his wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small picture with soft, worn-white edges. Gabe. He had a shirt on like Rick’s, only smaller and red, and he was wearing a cowboy hat and a big, transcendental child’s grin. When you grow up you forget how to smile like that.

“God, he looks like you Rick,” I told him.

An hour later it was closing time; I tore the top button off that cowboy shirt and slipped it in my front pocket. “Wake up Rick,” I murmured as I gently shook his shoulder.

I saw Rick again the next night. He’d ran into a city council member earlier in the day and heard all about Ashland being the treasure at the end of Dorothy’s rainbow. We both had to laugh about it. I told Rick I’d never get over how stupid that slogan is.

“You never know though, Mermaid,” he told me. “You can find those rainbows in the damndest places.” He set his beer down and looked past the mermaid sign in the smudgy window at a group of teenagers smoking cigarettes and laughing under a street lamp. Then Rick told his last story. “The beach in Oregon was the last stop on our trip. Gabe was starting to get weaker, and I figured we should take a rest. We went back to my mom’s place in Wyoming. The morning Gabe died it was raining like hell and there was the biggest damn rainbow outside Mermaid, a full half a circle with all the colors. Never seen one like that in my whole life, and I’ve been to rainier places than Wyoming. I think it might a’ been the last damn thing the boy saw.”

I kissed Rick that night, just because I felt like I should. My tongue slipped between his dry lips, and I tasted his acidic, smoky mouth, wet with a film of alcohol. He didn’t taste like the boys I usually kiss. His mouth was rougher, smarter. Afterwards he just looked at me, laughing a little and shaking his head.

“Night, Mermaid,” he said and walked out of The Cove.

Rick never came back. The story of Gabe’s rainbow was the last one, and I never asked what he’d been doing for the past three years because I already knew. And I knew he wouldn’t stay forever, he had too many other nowheres to be. But I like to think that if some other young bartender kisses him somewhere down the line, he’ll think of me. He’ll think of Ashland and The Cove, and he won’t kiss her back.

A week later the letter came. I walked through the door of the apartment, and Sabrina was sitting on the couch watching TV. The letter was lying opened on the coffee table next to her. She looked over at me, grabbed it, and stretched her hand toward me.

“It came, Del!” she said smiling. “I opened it because I couldn’t wait for you to get home, but I was careful. I even used that letter opening thingy.”

I took the letter from her and carefully, reluctantly unfolded it. My eyes quickly skimmed over the top of the paper.

“Dear Adele Edwards, we are delighted to inform you that you have been accepted into The Seattle Art Academy...”

I didn’t need to read the rest. I looked at Sabrina and smiled.

“Congrats, Del,” she squealed as she wrapped her long arms around my neck. “You made it!”

As I pass through Garden City, I turn on the CD player in my pickup and swivel the volume knob up until Johnny Cash drowns out the Kansas wind. I rest my right hand on that buckled-up envelope next to me and my fingers find that little round cowboy button tucked safely inside next to my letter. I think it’s just the right shade of indigo.