

Nice, Wyoming

The house (even when she had moved in her belongings, repainted in places, eradicated mushrooms growing from bathroom ceiling, installed window panes where missing, hooked up the 56k modem, fixed the leak in the radiator, messaged her sister (wtf! mushrooms!), messaged her mom (internet working!), got used to some of the more alarming sounds in the nighttime (*screeep, whoosh, rict-rict-rict*), etc. etc.) was ugly and nearly unlivable, and the land wasn't much better.

Jane had come here upon deciding that life was a cruel and mostly joyless endeavor. Here was where the sky was big and flat, where the wind blew in raw gusts unimpeded by trees or hills or any real natural features to speak of, where the sour smells of a feedlot would arrive on Thursdays, which was killing day at the slaughterhouses 200 miles to the southwest. Here was Nice, Wyoming (pr. *nis*, (def: a city in southern France), though everyone assumed it was pr. *nīs* (def: pleasant; agreeable, satisfactory) which, somehow, was even less appropriate). All of this, she reminded herself on Thursdays, was not so bad, better than alternative. Better than better - it was, as Raz might have said, *appropriate* for the human condition, appropriate for her specifically.

Nice, Wyoming, pop. 32. Founded by Jean-Paul Porier, failed trapper/fur trader (orig; Fr), reason for other French place names nearby (LaSalle, St. Claire, Louisville). Active oil-field (1938-1972), inactive oil field (1972-present day). Now nearly deserted (see: pop), save herself and 31 others (unspecified).

It would be easy to call the place a graveyard, but graveyards don't have the oil rigs, 100 feet tall, scarred by rust and wind. Graveyards are pleasant places with moss and flowers and a nice clean silence upon which one can think. This was something different i.e new i.e not spoiled by the endless ruminations and ponifications and renovations of humanity. It was a place without

a smell; empty, vacant, therefore clean. Thus the standing on the porch in the early morning light, thus the bathrobe and the bare feet and the instant coffee (black), thus the peaceful, impersonal, *cold* Jane felt as she admired the way the light flooded the lichen-colored landscape, which was like a great unspoiled canvas.

Thus the oil rigs, and the feeling she got when she looked upon them (at a half mile away, at 100 yards away, at so close that her nose was nearly touching, her eyes cast upward into infinity) which was queer and fluttering, which she called the oilrigfeeling and had started to crave from time to time. This oilrigfeeling had a majesty to it, and also a terror. When she tried to write it on the chalkboard atop the easel, she got this far:

power and might of industry vs. slow decay of nature (?)

contrast (visual, tactile) of tall/cold/angular object again flat/lukewarm/angle-less landscape

awe of mankind's loneliness? reflection of human condition (haha)

suggestion of watching/being watched? wish to be watched - etc.

She had it all figured out here. Her food shipments came directly to the postal depot (four miles down the dirt road, then 11 miles west on the county road), where she had gone on her first day to set up a locker. Jane ordered things in bulk - long grain rice in huge burlap sacks (straight from China!), dried chickpeas, Xtra Spicy Slim Jims, powdered Tang for vitamin C, jars of peanut butter the size of hubcaps. All this from bulkme.vn, where she placed an order each month.

She made money on the internet too. She wrote a simple Java script that she sold to small businesses. It would rate them on Yelp from a number of convincing-looking users. On vipgirls.net, she sold used underwear for up to \$50/pair (\$79, once, for a special request). Most of the girls on vipgirls.net posted lots of photos of themselves, videos even, but Jane uploaded only one photo - a Manga picture of a smiling girl with purple hair and lingerie.

By day she would go on drives, down the four-mile dirt road, left or right on the county road, then on for as long as she felt. Sometimes she'd pass oil rigs, some cattle, another car. Almost always, she saw nothing at all, save the vast sameness of the landscape. At night, she drew the shutters, locked the door with the deadbolt, poured some gin, and retreated to her bedroom (locking the door), where she browsed the internet without disruption, save the house sounds (*scrrrrp, prsst, mewllll*) which seemed to originate from somewhere just beyond the door.

It was at these times (deep night, house noises, three fingers of gin) that she thought of the prior place. How she would huddle against the sights and the smells, the evidences of humanity. (The nausea! the fingernails in the palm! the gagging, dry heaving in a bathroom, stolen oxygen masks over her bright red lipstick). She reminded herself that she had come here, to this place with hard wooden floors beneath her sleeping bag, the antique floor lamp with the lampshade covered in song birds, the keyhole which locked with a swivel and a loud click. These reminders, plus her *sunpiercingbreath* that she had learned from Raz, calmed her, kept her from floating back into bad thoughts. She fell asleep with the wind making searching noises against the walls and rafters.

She dreamed about Raz on nights like this. Raz was tall, but in these dreams she was simply enormous, stretching up to the ceiling in a tall cathedral. She leaned forward in a deep stretch, and when she exhaled it was warm and clean as sunlight. Jane would be in the pew (hard

wood uncushioned against pelvis, cold draft upon feet, sharp prayer book like a lead weight in her lap) but Raz's breath washed it all away. Then the cathedral would become her old apartment. Jane would walk through stacks of newspapers, old tins of peaches, the moth-eaten paisley couch. The back of her neck would prickle, and she'd try to walk faster, but she'd get snagged on the heel of a boot, or an exposed nail, and she'd struggle and awake, screaming.

It was always a relief when the sunlight peered into the room (absence of night, reminder of solitude, reminder of various choices that culminated in etc. etc.). What joy to open the shutters, flooding the room, making the key/lock seem so silly, making her feel light (she might skip now! or sing a few notes - testing the air)! Put on the bathrobe, fire the kettle, walk onto the porch and see that everything was as she'd left it. Oil rig right over there like a glorious sun dial.

The chalkboard on the easel had a fenced in to-do list. This is what the list said this morning:

mattress

warm boots

coffee grinder/good coffee (direct from Colombia? Kenya? how order coffee in burlap sack?)

locker

insulate bk. door

She had reached the gritty dregs of her coffee, and she tapped the second-to-last option with her chalk. She ached to get out of the house, the sun being so inviting, her desire to sing and skip growing inexplicably. Dressing quickly, she raced to the beat-up truck visible from the kitchen window.

The dirt road was severely rutted, and she pulled onto the county road feeling like a rung bell. The suspension on her flat bed was laughable (as in hahaha how do I know if I've been concussed), but she figured she could live with that. She wasn't so sure about what she would do when the battery failed on a cold winter day, when the wind cut razor-sharp and her coffee steam condensed mid-air and her fingers froze, even in the bear-hide gloves, as she fiddled under the hood. Nor was she sure about her options when the transmission whined a dying breath, causing her to hike the 9 miles back to her home, and once home, what then? Thus the mechanic kit in the bed, the "Car Maintenance for Dummies" in the cab, etc. etc.

What problems to have! What nerve, to live her vs. herself, Jane vs. Wyoming. Or, she reconfigured, her *aligned with herself*, *aligned with Wyoming*, *aligned with abandoned oil rigs*. Why against? Why vs.?

Vs. was the prior place. Jane vs. Lola vs. Deborah vs. Lu. Jane vs. the city. Jane vs. the homeless man across her apartment building. Jane vs. Ron, Jane vs. the passengers. Jane vs. the new city, and the new city after that. All the teaming and the fighting. Was it a competition? What was the prize?

Prize was as follows: a few hours peace and sanctuary at home; a feeling of strength, even on the street at night; the homeless man having left for somewhere else (maybe no longer homeless?); a gruff word of compliment from behind Ron's bushy mustache; a quiet flight; a quiet series of flights; a quick return home. Quiet, the ultimate prize, the absence of noise, absence of disturbance.

Jane vs. herself: midnight trips to the gym, two hours of make-up in the morning, a dab of perfume beneath her neatly ironed blouse and skirt. Jane, watching herself as she pushes the snack cart, as she smiles blandly, as she crosses her legs and prepares for landing. A real war of

conformity that was. But never mind that. The speedometer neared 60, and she caught a whiff of the fleshy smell of her body. It was sour, suggesting something that might need airing out. A good, complex aroma for a body to have, she decided.

The postal depot was in a little row of low brick buildings. It was the only one without a dusty “LEASING” sign within. The front door made a tinkling sound when pushed open, and the sunlight was languid and dense behind the dirty windows. Becca ran the place (government employee? unlikely, it seemed, out here) in plaid shirt and Carhartt overalls. Her dirty blond hair was pushed back, and her face was pleasant and fleshy, with a keen, leonine tick about the eyes.

The first time Jane had entered this place, Becca had asked “you in the place up 249?” Jane, not knowing the name of the road yet, nodded dumbly, and Becca gave her a moment’s scan. She had this way (half-smile cocked, finger holding her place in magazine, foot frozen mid-tap) of looking at a person all at once. Jane tried not to fidget, tried to meet her eye with a hard jaw and a certain self-possession (western, western, western, Jane told herself). Becca hadn’t asked much more since then.

Probably it was the lion-like appearance that reminded Jane of Raz. Raz, who remained unknowable, who Jane imagined would have withered like a sunflower in a place like Nice, Wyoming. Nonetheless, she appeared in Jane’s mind eye whenever she entered the postal depot.

Becca greeted Jane, and Jane greeted Becca. They walked together to the back room, which was locked, and Jane browsed the mail lockers alone. There were 10 units in total (three others with locks (!)). Jane’s was the last in the row. She retrieved several large parcels from her locker (power tools, soy sauce, 50-pack of panties) and hauled them back to her truck. Becca helped with the soy sauce, then waved good bye as she returned to her magazine (something about guns?, or maybe housekeeping?). On the way out, Jane deposited the various packages

addressed to men all over the country (and one in Manitoba), their money already safe in her Paypal.

It's on the drive back that Jane noticed the oil rig. Against the landscape, it looked robin's-egg blue, and Jane was taken by it in an inexplicable way. It went something like this: the rig was atop a low hill, and in the noon sun it cut a blazing, powerful, *defiant*, silhouette against the sky and the grey storm clouds congregated far to the west. More than anything, Jane felt a surge of power, and she instinctively took the gravel turn off that lead up the hill.

In the cab of the flat bed, Jane kept a brown duffel bag. It was packed with a fancy camera (her uncle's), a drawing pad with an old set of pastels, a harmonica, a journal with a ballpoint pen. She had this notion that she could be an artist. Of what, she wasn't sure. When she left for Wyoming, she wanted to cover her bases in terms of what art she might be capable of, not having shown any aptitude (though no *lack* of aptitude, *per se*) in any one particular field. This is what she grabbed when she left the truck at the end of the gravel road.

She cut up the landscape in her work boots. The brush here was tough. Under her heel went rock jasmine, horsemint, milkweed (tall petals like antlers, tentacular and strange). The specks of pink and white seemed garish against the anemic soil-hue of everything else. The storm clouds were gathering across the prairie like some huge indigenous conference. She licked her finger (sticky, bitter) and tested the wind. It was drawn toward the storm. It was like something somewhere was drawing a great breath.

The oil rig, which had begun as a modest steeple on the horizon, had grown with each step until it towered like a sky scraper. The rigid ordering of iron, the careful scaffolding, the sheer *bulk*; it sent a chill through her that suggested the alien and the dangerous. From top to bottom it was painted aqua (the hue not as brilliant as from afar), The ground all around was flat

and barren, all other evidence of the extraction eliminated except the thing itself. She cleared a small ring of dust and settled herself, gazing up in rapture.

More than anything, Jane waited. She waited for this oilrigfeeling she had to manifest in a more productive form (the brown bag was yet unopened) - she waited for it to evolve, or clarify, or spark some definitions of who she was, or where she was, or what was to be. No forcing it, now. The oil rig caught the sun's heat, seemed to shimmer with it like a jewel. *This*, Jane thought, *could draw every living thing for ten miles*. Why just living? Jane responded. It had already drawn her, both her attention, but also her body, empirical evidence of gravity. The more she gazed, the less her sense of up and down. Perhaps she could walk along it like a gangplank, leaping at last into the endless sky.

Her thoughts returned to Becca and Raz, shuffling them, holding them side by side, focusing on one, then the other. Why must all things be like other things? Why must all things return? Questions for an oil rig.

Perhaps things were not all alike. Perhaps Jane created things that were each one alike the other. What a horrifying idea, she decided.

On the horizon, the storm had metastasized, reaching from one end of the prairie to another. It seemed absolutely mighty - a moveable fortress, an army conquering the whole empty country. She smelled it then, the first damp on the air. It was rank and overly sweet (like a crowded cabin, like the whisky on a pilot's breath, like panic in a lavatory stall). Jane picked the hitchhikers from her socks, squeezing each one between her forefingers until it hurt.

Sighing, Jane lay on her back. Maybe her art was to just sit here and think (find beauty in ugly things, compare one thing to another, hold each in her minds eye and weigh it like justice). The thought gave her warmth, and she soaked it in with the sun, which was heavy on her eyelids.

The horsemint was fragrant, and even with her eyes closed, she felt the oil rig towering above her, unflinching against all torments.

Jane dreamed briefly of an airplane. She was pacing the flight deck, searching each row frantically for someone. As she scanned, each face was sickly and strange, and she grew short of breath. In the last row sat Raz, alone, her hair spilling over her face in its haphazard way. The smile on her face (so real! so lifelike! permanent as a stamp) did not flicker as Jane convulsed in panic.

A fat drop of rain woke her. In the dim light, the oil rig was steely gray and frigid. Jane stood abruptly, taking in the light gray sky above, the soot color of the sky just over there (one hill away? maybe two?). Gathering her duffel, she turned and ran down the hill.

The rain came quick and fierce, pounding up the dusty earth all around her. Jane's hair dripped and then ran in her eyes; her shirt sleeves clung to her like tissue paper. Already, small rivulets streamed alongside her heels. As she ran, her boots collected fresh mud. The brush conspired to trip her. Stray roots caught her feet. She fell into a thorny bush, spraying mud down her front, sending her duffel flying. It landed some feet away with a grim crunch.

The storm followed the rain; winds bellowed around her and whipped rain into her face. Her flat bed was just now in sight, barely visible through the deluge. She stumbled straight into it, wrenching the door open and flinging herself inside. Her breath came in pants. She realized she had left the duffel bag outside, where all the contents (save the harmonica, perhaps) were surely ruined. When she started the engine, She found the truck wheels already sunk into unyielding mud.

All around her, the world was turned asunder (sinking in the stomach, then the thing beyond sinking (plummeting? complete upheaval?)). The truck seemed to shake, wind howling

through the spaces that weren't quite snug. Jane tasted bile gurgling up her throat, swallowing fiercely to keep it down (it wouldn't stay down, she knew). The wind was going to rip the door off, was going to puncture her bubble, claim her for its own. She held her hands over her ears, willing herself to calm.

Once again, Jane is back on the flight deck. First there's the tilting (water bottles spinning forward, slight gasps all around her), then there is the surprise, and the shock (baggage falling forward, screams of panic from the men). She runs to secure the snack cart, yellow masks shooting down. Like dandelions - a crazy thought! (Her, 10 years old, bent double with a weeding tool, removing dandelions from the front yard, her dad watching to make sure she got all the way down to the root, the whole root system sweetite, if you leave the roots in it will grow back). Then shaking - everything shaking and rattling! No time to secure snack cart, She sits, because what else to do? One other woman in the row (smiling somehow? beautiful hair, hands tucked in lap, clever face like a lioness), turns to her and helps her with her mask. Raz, she says her name is (smiling somehow!). Takes Jane's hand (hand is rough and warm, like a cowboy, like somewhere honest, safe i.e. somewhere else). Her name is Raz, and everything will be just fine. Cover one nostril, then breath in and out. Then cover the other. In and out, in and out. It's called *sun piercing breath*.

Eventually, rain has stopped. Turn on engine, put in neutral. Get out of truck, then push, push, push so hard. Finally, little nudge. Rock truck up and out of rut, then drive down gravel road. After that, don't really remember much. Back home, somehow. In sleeping bag, somehow. Naked, somehow.

At night, Jane wakes. She hasn't drawn the shutters, and through the window shines a full moon, enormous from its low rung on the horizon, blood-orange. Without dressing, she exits her

room, walking over the cold floorboards and past the empty hearth. The house emits slow creaks with each step. On the table are the dishes from her breakfast, and they seemed artificial and staged in the half-light. The porch door is ajar, and she enters into the moonlight.

The night is unusually hot, and it clings to her skin like a thin shawl. This is not the landscape of her mornings. The earth stretches in each direction, damp and steaming in the night-heat. Spread everywhere are pools where the earth could no longer sip the rainwater. Tall grasses have already sprung up in the center of each little oval, and they sway rhythmically in the absence of wind. Each pool reflects the light, orange here, silvery there, pale magenta far on the horizon. It gives the impression of a great easel which spans the extent of her sight. And above it all sits moon, the artist, casting flickering spells of color. Jane feels the sweat beading on her body, drawing forth the days' chill from her bones, sending her body-smell skyward to join the eddies of light and air rollicking the world without hurry. Jane stands there for what feels like hours, bearing witness.