

Spaces



By Cameron Bauder

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The lights reveal a studio with many paintings. An old woman sits behind an easel. She appears to be preparing the space for her next painting. Finally she sits down and wets her brush.

The old woman begins painting using the color black as Charlie enters.

He enters nonchalantly and begins his journey around the space.

It's a long journey as he looks at the paintings.

CHARLOTTE

If you have any questions feel free to ask.

Charlie quickly turns to face her.

CHARLIE

I'm sorry?

CHARLOTTE

The paintings dear. If you have any questions about them feel free to ask.

CHARLIE

Did you um... paint all these yourself?

CHARLOTTE

Oh yes. Of course.

CHARLIE

They're very well done.

CHARLOTTE

Thank you.

CHARLIE

Do you only paint portraits of people?

CHARLOTTE

Not always but I find that people are fascinating to paint.

CHARLIE

Why's that?

CHARLOTTE

It's hard to explain to someone who has never painted one.

CHARLIE

How do you know I haven't?

CHARLOTTE

Then you wouldn't need to ask.

CHARLIE

I see.

CHARLOTTE

(Pause)

You want me to explain anyway don't you?

CHARLIE

If you don't mind. I'm interested in listening.

CHARLOTTE

Why don't I just show you? Grab that chair over there and take a seat. I'll paint a picture for you.

He takes a nearby chair and sits down in front of her. She looks at him and then begins painting again.

CHARLIE

Haven't you already started that one?

CHARLOTTE

Oh yes but it's never too late to change. In fact sometimes an early ending of one thing is an unexpected beginning of another.

(silence)

What's your name dear?

CHARLIE

Charlie.

CHARLOTTE

Ah, an English name.

CHARLIE

I suppose.

CHARLOTTE

Well Charlie, as I said before some endings are others beginning. This is why I always start with black in my paintings.

CHARLIE

Black?

CHARLOTTE

It's a color associated with sadness, remorse, unhappiness, death... but also, mystery. Which is why I start with black. I don't know what or who I'm going to paint. I also don't know much, if anything, about them. It's all a Mystery.

(Pause)

So, now that we are done with the color black, why don't you help me fill in the spaces Charlie.

CHARLIE

The spaces?

CHARLOTTE

For the painting dear. The painting needs more colors.

CHARLIE

You want me to paint?

CHARLOTTE

No, no, no. I want you to tell me about yourself. Your hopes, interests, problems, family, friends... your life.

CHARLIE

I'm not sure what this has to do with the painting.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, everything my dear. This painting lacks color. I know nothing about you so I've only been able to use black to draw out the lines of mystery. From those lines will branch your colors.

CHARLIE

I'm sorry but I'm not exactly here for a therapy session.

CHARLOTTE

Neither am I Charlie. I'm just a translator for your words.

(Noticing his confusion)

You tell me about yourself using words and I will translate those words into colors to create your portrait. It's really not that hard.

CHARLIE

Okay... I'm not really sure where to start.

CHARLOTTE

Let's start with red. What excites you, gives you power, the energy to keep going? What's your passion Charlie?

CHARLIE

I suppose um... sorry I just need a minute to think.

CHARLOTTE

Take your time.

CHARLIE

I'm not really sure.

CHARLOTTE

Well what brought you here to my workshop today?

CHARLIE

I just kind of-

CHARLOTTE

I apologize. I don't mean to be rude. I've never seen you before so I just thought I would ask.

CHARLIE

No, it's alright... I guess I just needed a quiet place to think.

CHARLOTTE

About what?

CHARLIE

Just things.

CHARLOTTE

I see. Did my paintings help?

CHARLIE

Maybe.

CHARLOTTE

Do you like painting charlie?

CHARLIE

I've only tried it a handful of times.

CHARLOTTE

What do you do for fun then?

CHARLIE

Honestly... I don't have much time for things like that... at least I didn't.

CHARLOTTE

Why's that?

CHARLIE

Well... I... I'm uh...

CHARLOTTE

Too busy.

CHARLIE

Yes. Busy.

CHARLOTTE

Work taking up too much of your time?

CHARLIE

You could say that. I'm a salesman. Although I always wanted to be a writer.

Charlotte begins painting.

CHARLOTTE

Married?

CHARLIE

No.

CHARLOTTE

Why not?

CHARLIE

No real good connections I suppose. That spark just... is never there.

CHARLOTTE

But you've had it before?

CHARLIE

Yes. But she's gone now...

CHARLOTTE

No longer with us?

CHARLIE

No. Just no longer together.

CHARLOTTE

I suppose that probably makes you sad?

CHARLIE

Not so much anymore. It was a while ago.

CHARLOTTE

You still talk with her?

CHARLIE

No. Although I still hope shes doing well.

CHARLOTTE

That's a good wish to have for someone else. Very kind of you.

CHARLIE

Thank you.

(Pause)

CHARLOTTE

Would you like to see your portrait?

CHARLIE

You're done already?

She turns the portrait around for him to see. It's him but there's barely any color. It's not nearly as beautiful as the others.

It's um... It's not quite like the others.

CHARLOTTE

You don't like it?

CHARLIE

It's just not as... colorful. Why is that?

CHARLOTTE

You just seem to have a lot of spaces in your life Charlie. Lots of things you've either let go or dreams you never chased. Life you've never lived.

CHARLIE

I still don't see what that has to do with my portrait.

CHARLOTTE

It's more of a reflection.

CHARLIE

No... no this... its... I want you to make it like the others please.

CHARLOTTE

I can only paint what you tell me Charlie. I'm a translator for your-

CHARLIE

I don't care what you are!

(Pause)

This is... this is not me.

CHARLOTTE

There's a yellow fade to you. A sunshine and joy lost and fading to time. Never revitalized to it's once bright and beautiful color. You have small bits and pieces of Red but that passion is seemingly locked away inside you. You're covered with Blue depression and a loyalty to a life you seemingly don't want. You lack the color Orange, your warmth and energy. And most of all... a gray surrounds you. A depression. You lack color Charlie.

(Pause)

But I think you are already very aware of this.

CHARLIE

I did everything right... you know? I listened in school. Got good grades. I was a great friend. I'd give up anything for them but eventually things just... they change. People forget about you. They move on and I just let it happen. Over and over again. Until it was just better to be alone. I even tried to change things up. Find a hobby. But the daily cycle of going to work and loneliness made it just... not even worth trying. And then things happened and now I'm...

(Pause)

In all honesty. This... this doesn't really surprise me. It's just shocking because I had hoped it would have looked... different.

CHARLOTTE

My painting is only a translation Charlie. A translation of your words. How you see yourself. Right now it seems you don't think your life was very colorful.

She turns the painting around again and begins painting again.

I want you to look again at the paintings Charlie. Specifically those ones over there.

Charlie goes to look at the paintings and something seems different about his reaction.

CHARLIE

These are... that's James and this one, this one is Olivia. Grace, Ellie, William, Ben, Oliver...

CHARLOTTE

Those paintings are unfortunately not finished

CHARLIE

Impossible. They're perfect. It looks just like them.

CHARLOTTE

They're missing a color

She stands up and walks over to him. She takes his hand and begins painting his hand with green paint. She then takes his hand and presses it to one of the paintings, leaving a green hand print.

CHARLIE

What are you doing?!

CHARLOTTE

They are missing they're Green.

CHARLIE

It's ruined!

CHARLOTTE

No Charlie. It's even more beautiful and accurate now.

She sits back down to continue painting his portrait.

Not many of my portraits have the color green. Green can often symbolize misfortune and jealousy but in this case, for you, it's a symbol of good health, generosity, renewal. The way you see yourself is not at all how others saw you. You were a color they were missing. A helping hand in their grayest days. Your life touched theirs. Even now... after you're gone.

CHARLIE

You knew?

CHARLOTTE

About your death? Yes. It's a gift of mine. Being able to see things others cannot.

CHARLIE

I don't want to leave them.

She walks over to him and takes his hand again, pressing it to the many paintings to leave the green handprint.

CHARLOTTE

You never will Charlie. Life is incredibly fragile. Once it's gone it's gone. Many people believe they'll never accomplish something or be someone important.

She walks over to his painting again as he stares at his hand prints across the many paintings.
But in reality as you can see Charlie. It's not really that hard. You lived a life not for yourself but for

CHARLOTTE

others. In return they helped paint you. You accomplished so much in your wonderful and beautiful life.

She shows him the portrait of himself which is now filled with colorful handprints of all shapes, sizes, and colors across his face.

He stumbles to the painting and gently takes it from her. He then turns back to the paintings of the people from his life and tightly hugs his own portrait.

CHARLIE

I have to go don't I?

CHARLOTTE

We all do... eventually.

He walks to her and hugs her tightly. He repeatedly thanks her as he cries on her shoulder.

CHARLIE

I suppose. It's time to head off then.

CHARLOTTE

If you're ready.

CHARLIE

I'll miss them.

CHARLOTTE

and they'll miss you.

He makes for the door.

CHARLIE

I never caught your name.

CHARLOTTE

It quite similar to yours actually. The name Charlie became popular with the French and from it my name was created. Charlotte. In fact, both have a similar if not same meaning even though they come from different places.

CHARLIE

What is that?

CHARLOTTE

Free.

Charlie smiles and turns to the door. He takes a deep breath, and moves on.

Charlotte takes his portrait and places it with the others before sitting back down to begin another masterpiece.

Sob Stories

Daniel Sisk gave up playing the piano when his parents divorced. Not to punish them for staying together long enough for one last photo after his graduation ceremony. Not because he would never be good enough to compete against anyone who played in a real city. Daniel resented the time he had spent confined alone. He wasn't just insecure about the man he was becoming, but ashamed. As he drove on the interstate past familiar fields and pastures, he couldn't stop thinking about his struggle to fit in and relate to the majority of people he had known. Thoughts of the lies he had told girls he admired in hopes of earning their admiration in return filled him with unending embarrassment and guilt. He was frightened of his own behaviors, expecting to helplessly keep repeating them for the remainder of his life.

He was nineteen when he came to Fargo, a place he had never been, and the city he had chosen to study in with hopes of finding some sort of meaning and belonging outside the melodramas of his claustrophobic upbringing. His home had been full of slamming doors and loud TVs, followed by moments of unbearable silence. Not that this had made him a necessarily unspoiled child. His mother who had spent her childhood and adolescence in poverty, cleaning up the filth of strangers in hotels, instilled in her son an awareness of the consequences of privilege. His father, who talked over anyone he didn't agree with, would not allow his son to lack any advantage. Daniel's only disadvantage in life was that consistent conformity and rigid reproaches had drowned any sense of direction, robbed him of purpose, and replaced these with a tendency to rebel, an impatience for not getting what he wanted, and a repressed longing for attention, whether it be good or bad.

When Daniel arrived at his dormitory he became aware of the unavoidable, impending collision with his roommate, who by the looks of it had arrived before him. Clothes were thrown haphazardly around the room and formed a mountain on one of the beds. Even though this was their first day in the dorm, it appeared to Daniel that more than half of the clothes were already soiled. Covering the entirety of one of the desks was a TV screen playing *Donnie Darko*. Next to it was a bookshelf filled with protein powders, supplements and medications. Daniel picked up one of the pill bottles to learn it was Prozac prescribed to a Clay Dunnigan. It was then that the collision happened, and Daniel found himself shaking embarrassingly as he tried to put the pill bottle back on the bookshelf, but his roommate appeared not to take offense.

"You must be?" his roommate asked.

"Daniel... I'm sorry." He said as an introduction.

"I've been anxious to meet you. I'm Clay. But you already knew that." Clay said glancing for a moment at the shelf of medications and supplements.

He has spread himself all over the place. Daniel thought. *Doesn't he know that some of this room belongs to me? I hardly know where to put any of my things, seeing as he has already claimed it all.* He set down the box that contained a few valuable items; a computer, a lockbox with some cash, and a camera, on the floor of what he hoped would be his side of the room. He looked out the open window. It was the peak of August and the room was unbearably hot. He noticed how sweaty Clay was, and then felt uncomfortably with his hand at the sweat beginning to seep from his hairline. He had not even been in the room a few minutes. "We need to get a fan

if either of us wants to survive this.” Daniel said, and he was surprised how dramatic everything he said sounded.

“Sure, we could steal a fan from one of the hallways... Or we could go to the store and get one if you have a car,” Clay replied. Daniel answered yes, and Clay observed out loud that Daniel was spoiled. For a moment, Daniel wasn’t sure whether or not he was kidding. When they got into the car Clay asked, “Is it okay if I smoke in here?” but was already lighting a cigarette. Again Daniel answered yes, but began to eye Clay too much to escape his notice, prompting him to laugh, “Relax, I promise not to get any ash in your new car.” Daniel forced himself to smile and wondered if Clay really thought that on such a windy day as this, the ash would end up anywhere but outside the open window. “Do you smoke?” Clay asked, and this time Daniel said no, that he was entirely ignorant of cigarettes, vaping, of anything that shouldn’t be inhaled.

“You don’t smoke *anything*?” Clay said, and then added despairingly, “Damn, I’m definitely not in California anymore.”

“Is that where you’re from?” Daniel asked.

“Yeah, Santa Barbara.”

“What is it like?”

“A lot of the people don’t have souls but at least you’re surrounded by beauty everywhere you look.”

“I’ve always wanted to go there. To be where everything happens. To see where culture comes from. Nothing, I mean *nothing* happens here.” Daniel noticed again that he was being a little dramatic, but he truly believed that everything he said was true. And he was surprised at how open he was being towards someone he barely knew. *I suppose we’ll know too much of each other soon enough*, he thought with a little bit of horror. *I might as well reveal myself now.*

It was five o’clock and cars hurled down every lane and began to swarm Daniel’s car. He was unaccustomed to driving in a place with so much traffic and tried to hide his nervousness from Clay. When they got to the store each of them picked out a fan to put beside their beds. When they returned to the dorm room it was still too hot to stay there, and Daniel decided to wait to unload the rest of his things from the car until it was dark. Clay asked him if they could go on a drive to check out things around town and Daniel was compelled to agree since he had already driven around campus and was curious to see what more there was to the city surrounding them.

Clay had left California in disgrace. He had spent his whole life competing against his brothers for the attention and approval of his father. The last time he saw his mother had been nearly a year ago. She was alone in her home rocking back and forth slowly as she crouched on the floor, staring with wide unblinking eyes on the needle she had poked into her veins. She had surrounded herself with empty glass bottles forming a circle around her and Clay had wondered what would happen if he stepped into it. Would it be like stepping on a wasp’s nest? Would the prick of a needle feel as bad as it looked when it stung him over and over again as he gave into his cravings? And who was there to blame for these cravings? “Why are you doing this?” were the last words he remembered saying to her, and for a moment, he didn’t think he would get a response. What kind of question was this anyway, to ask someone who had spent so much time destroying themselves rather than being there to love, to at least witness the unraveling of the life

she had created. “It’s to keep me safe... I’m safe here...” The response was enough to keep Clay away from her, to convince him that she was as good as dead.

Clay had done everything he could to earn his father’s trust and respect. He had set and defeated his own records as a sprinter. He had dedicated much of his time to training and toning his body. His success as a wide receiver on the football field had attracted the attention of prestigious universities who offered him scholarships. He was often seen smiling in photos with his dad’s arm on his shoulder as he posed with trophies and medals. But no matter how hard he worked, there was always more to be accomplished. And there was one test he could not pass, the drug test. As a result, his aspiration to be a professional athlete, the possibility of attending a college where his older brother wasn’t there to watch over him in case he messed up again, and his father’s approval had been ripped away. Clay started smoking cigarettes and spending all of the money he earned on weed and spending more of his time in front of the TV rather than at the gym. His girlfriend would not follow him to some frigid, unknown place and neither would his friends. He arrived in North Dakota knowing nobody except his brother who was to report back to their father everything Clay did and because of this he stayed as far away from him as possible.

Daniel and Clay got out of the car to walk along a trail beside the river. Men and women jogged past them, some pushing strollers or walking dogs. Grasshoppers flew up in front of them as they were disturbed from basking in the sun. They reminded Daniel of when he and his family had moved into a new house in the countryside where swarms of grasshoppers and crickets had tormented him. In the summer, he couldn’t go outside without clumps of grasshoppers jumping into his shirt, up his pants, into his hair. In the fall, crickets seemed to be hiding everywhere in the house, screaming through the night, especially in the dark basement where he slept. No matter how hard he looked, he could never find them. Daniel simply remarked that he couldn’t stand insects, flinching a little as they flew by. “I don’t think you’d like California much,” Clay laughed. “My dad has a pretty nice place, but it still has roaches.” Daniel had never seen such a thing in real life before, and was troubled that his perfect idea of California could not coexist with such horrors.

“I still wish I could see it,” Daniel persisted. “At least then I could see behind the curtain, I guess. See if I’m missing out.”

“Missing out on what?” Clay asked, baffled.

“How can I explain it to you? You just got here. You don’t know how it feels to even exist here.” He thought for a moment about the books, the movies, and the music that celebrated where Clay was from. They all seemed to converge and testify to a promised land where people could express themselves and their identities with terrifying power. He wanted to embody a cultural moment, or at least witness one unfold. California was where people went to scratch their names into the minds of every American, even if only for a moment. “I’m sorry—I just feel like growing up here you’re forced to accept that you’re nothing. And no matter how hard you try to change that you’ll never get anywhere. Even if you painted better than Picasso or sang like Whitney Houston there would be no one to see it... you’d be singing in some run down church for funerals as your talent decays and fades away.”

“What is your talent?” Clay asked, unfazed by Daniel’s depressing tone.

“Nothing really, I’ve never achieved or succeeded in anything. I’m worried I’ll never find the thing that I’m good at... that I’ll always be alone because of that. I played piano for as long as I can remember. I wrote some songs—”

“Really? I’ve tried writing some songs too—rap music. Maybe you could play something while I rap?”

“I gave it up. I stopped. I only played to make my dad happy. When he left I had nobody to please but myself and sitting in a room alone with my dead sister’s piano playing chords and scales was not making me happy.”

“But you wouldn’t be alone if you played in front of a crowd.”

“What crowd?”

“You act like you’re still in the middle of nowhere, but look around you. This city is new to you too, and it may not be Hollywood but this could be the place where you find out who you want to be and what you’re good at. You act like you’re so alone, but you’ve got somebody right by you, listening to you. Being alone, for you, is a choice.”

“You sound like the self-help books my mom gives me for Christmas.” Daniel laughed, but he realized with despair that morphed into hope that maybe being alone had been a choice for him.

“At least you have a mother,” Clay said quietly, but without any of the sharpness in tone that would indicate he was offended. Daniel felt a pang of anger and embarrassment at this remark. He felt like the conversation had slipped down the stairs into the unforgiving shadows of parental absence, neglect, and domination. This was the price of getting to know someone else, to bear witness to these shadows, and to reveal your own.

“I’m so sorry,” Daniel said uncertainly, “when did she—?”

“She’s not... but she’s never, you know, thought about whether her son might need a self-help book... She’s never been there. Before my dad got full custody over me and my brothers I remember being in her house—a small house—so I should have felt close to her” Clay shuddered, “I watched her... these men... when they were done... they—” He stopped and Daniel froze, he didn’t know a way to appropriately fill the silence that had fallen over them. He listened to the chorus of the wind as it filtered through the tall grass and tree branches, unrelenting, forceful, violated by a car alarm. Clay continued as though he hadn’t stopped talking for a minute, “came for me... and she was right there. She was passed out right across the hall... I remember calling out. I screamed. But she wouldn’t wake up.”

Daniel thought, *Why is he telling me this? Why is he revealing himself like this to me?* Any of his preconceived notions about who Clay was fell apart. He couldn’t explain why, but he suddenly remembered the time when he was very young and ignorant of birth and death that he crawled up a tree to steal the eggs from a robin’s nest, thinking he would be able to raise them as pets. Not knowing what would come out of them, he kept the eggs warm in his hands for barely a moment, and then they started to move as the babies tried to shatter through their shells into the world. He remembered his mother calling out to him, asking what he was doing and he shamefully thought of the baby birds, how they would instinctually cry out for their mother to feed them, warm them, and keep them alive. He watched in a state of absolute panic as the ugly, naked, blind heads came out from their blue shells with beaks wide open, gaping for food. He could not tell his mother what he had done, scared of the spanking he would receive, but even more terrified of the unblinking, persistent, stubborn will of the baby birds to survive. Daniel had taken the babies

as they screamed, as their mother probably screamed when she came back to an empty nest, and unable to get them back up the tree, dug a hole in the ground and, too scared to put them out of their misery, buried them alive.

“I probably shouldn’t have told you that. Nobody wants to know those things about people, not right away. But I guess there’s something about you. It’s hard to explain... like I can see it in your eyes, how you look at me. And I hear it in the way you’ve been talking about yourself. There’s something hiding in you too.” Clay said.

“I’ve got nothing to hide really, but what happened to you is... there’s no words to describe how sorry I am that she let that happen.”

“You want to know what she had the audacity to say to me last year? When I came to see her, around Christmas, just to make sure she wasn’t alone. She said she was ‘keeping herself safe’ while she was high as a kite again. I kept thinking, why? Why couldn’t you keep me safe? And that’s what I hate about reality. We always hope it will change. Even when the threat is staring you right in the face, as it takes a big bite into you, and we have to pretend like it isn’t happening. Like it’s not about to swallow us whole.”

“I suppose that’s what sucks about losing someone too, not that it’s the same, but you’re walking around with this big emotional scar and everybody pretends it isn’t there.”

“You liar,” Clay laughed, pushing Daniel rougher than he meant to. “You said you had nothing to hide but you’re just as pathetic a loser as I am trying to act like you’re not all messed up.”

Daniel fell onto his hands and Clay helped him get back up, “What was that for?” Daniel said, trying to hide his embarrassment under a smile for a second before he noticed the blood.

“Sorry I didn’t mean—”

“You know what I think? I think—” But Daniel stopped himself. His mind had flashed back to the boys Clay reminded him of back on the playground who had pushed him, hit him, thrown things at him because he couldn’t catch a ball, wasn’t fast enough to run away, wasn’t strong enough to fight back.

“I really am sorry. I didn’t expect you to just fall over when I pushed you. I grew up with two older brothers.” But when Daniel wouldn’t say anything he said, “Go ahead. Say what you need to say.”

Daniel looked at Clay’s arms, legs, and chest which were twice the size of his. He was intimidated by it, envious of it, and he hated him for it. He knew it wasn’t fair, but he said it anyway, “I’m sick of guys like you. Always the center of attention. Always pushing people around. Never thinking what will happen. You think I’m hiding something? I’m hiding from people like you. People who think their pain has to be everybody else’s. You thoughtless prick.”

“There it is.” Clay said. “Well... I’ve certainly been called worse.”

“I’m sure you have.” Daniel said, humiliated.

“Is that all you need to say?”

“No...” and Daniel stared off at a bird as it settled itself on a tree branch. “My sister taught me to play the piano. Nobody could play and sing like her. She was supposed to be there for my first concert. I was too scared to get on that stage. If she would have been there she would have bullied me onto that stage, pulled my hair, slapped my face, or maybe she would have smiled at me and told me everything would be alright. When she died in that crash it was like there was

nobody in the world who understood me anymore. And I didn't understand myself anymore, or why I was playing. I was just trying to make my dad proud and that's never enough."

"I understand you." Clay said, "I know what it's like to lose yourself, your purpose, trying to make somebody else happy. I wasn't always the best person. There are plenty of moments in my life where I'll admit I took out my pain on other people." He grabbed Daniel's hands and tried unsuccessfully to blow the dirt and sand out from the wounds. "I remember my first job, I was sixteen, picking apples at my cousin's orchard. Anyway, when me and some of the other guys were tired at the end of the day this really skinny kid was jogging by. They dared me to see if I could hit him, and I didn't think I would. I threw this apple as hard as I could at him as he went by, and it nailed him right in the face. My friends were laughing, but I swear I didn't. I dropped my face in my hands, completely ashamed... I wanted to apologize to that kid as he cried looking around, not knowing where I was hiding up in the trees. And then they all started to pelt him with apples. And I had started it. It was completely my fault."

"So you just watched as they all attacked that poor kid."

"And that's not even the beginning of the things I've done that I wish I hadn't, but I suppose it's a good place to start. But there's been times when I've hurt people and I don't regret it."

"What do you mean you didn't regret it?"

"I just don't."

Clay helped Daniel finish unloading the rest of his things from his car into their dorm room. Daniel was arranging his clothes in the closet, scribbling dates and times of classes in a planner, and making sure that all of his things were in their proper place while Clay immersed himself in *The Virgin Suicides*. Daniel looked out the open window to see a group of people playing volleyball on the lawn while a couple of skateboarders glided down the sidewalk. He wasn't used to so much activity, especially this late at night. The sounds of distant, unintelligible conversations numbed the constant feeling of loneliness that had become second nature to him. Although he was still suspicious of Clay after the incident by the river, and annoyed with him for taking up more than half the room, he was glad to have a roommate that didn't seem to mind his presence, and seemed to be putting in an effort to get to know him. *But what was there to know?* The thought had dashed across his mind like it always did before he had a chance to scold it away. *I'm done thinking that way. I'm done pretending I don't exist.*

"Hey," said Clay, rolling out of bed so that he was standing on top of his clothes. "Shouldn't we do something fun before we're too busy to do anything?" At first Daniel didn't know what to say. Part of him wanted to decompress in the bed of fresh sheets he had just made for himself, another part of him wanted to do something wild. He wanted to run away from the confines of his old routine and embrace the unknown possibilities of what could happen on a Saturday night in a new city.

"We should." Daniel said, and surprised himself when he blurted out, "I want to go to a party."

"A party?" Clay grinned wickedly. "Are we so ready to sacrifice our careers in academics?"

"Absolutely, but I don't know anyone who might throw a party."

"Is it so wrong to throw our own? Unless you've heard enough of my sob stories."

“I was imagining doing something crazy with a group of strangers. You know, loud music, chaos, delirium.”

“Well the reality of anything like that going down in our dorm room of all places is not conceivable, I’m afraid.”

“I suppose nobody would want to party on top of your dirty clothes.” Daniel said before he could stop himself.

“Unfortunately we don’t know anybody, dirty clothes or not, who would be willing to tolerate your antisocial inclinations.” Clay said jokingly, changing out of his underwear and standing naked from the waist down, throwing his soiled underpants randomly on the floor, mortifying Daniel. Clay changed into a tie-dye shirt, sweatpants, and a backwards baseball cap. Then he reached into a pile of clothes and pulled out a bottle of tequila and smiled triumphantly, “You want to take a shot with me? Then we can talk more about what California is *really* like.”

Flashbacks of Standing Rock

It was September 2016, my friends and I were headed to Cannon Ball, North Dakota to write about and photograph the Sacred Stone Camp, formed in April by a group of women from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe with the goal of monitoring and eventually stopping the Dakota Access Pipeline from crossing the Missouri River and threatening their reservation's water supply. The pipeline had been rerouted from crossing north of Bismarck, where the majority are white, after an environmental assessment found that it would pose a risk to the city's drinking water.

Energy Transfer Partners designed the 4 billion dollar pipeline to transfer oil from the northwest corner of North Dakota, where an oil boom dependent on fracking that injects water mixed with toxic chemicals deep underground—putting aquifers used for drinking water at risk according to records obtained by *ProPublica*. Nearly 570,000 barrels of oil would be transferred from North Dakota to Illinois daily. According to Energy Transfer Partners' website, it would transport 40% of North Dakota's oil production per day by much safer means than by trucks or train. According to the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, oil and gas pipelines have leaked 3,300 times since 2010—about 9 million gallons of oil.

My friends and I took the trip to the heart of the protest activity surrounding the pipeline with the goal of bolstering awareness of the Sacred Stone Camp's mission and to donate some of the clothes we received from people in Fargo. We traveled 250 miles west towards the site of Sitting Bull's murder 126 years ago by the federal government, past an "information checkpoint"—in reality a military checkpoint complete with guns to interrogate anyone who lived near or was headed in the direction of where construction on the Dakota Access Pipeline had come to a halt before crossing the river.

The Standing Rock reservation has a history of resistance and perseverance against the encroachment of white settlers, when the Ghost Dance movement reached the Dakotas (a religious movement with the goal of preserving Native American lands and culture) white settlers were frightened that Sitting Bull, who united the Sioux tribes, would use the movement to energize an uprising. As tensions between Native Americans and the United States' government became increasingly volatile, Sitting Bull surrendered to secure the safety of his people from genocide, and Standing Rock became the place of their confinement, and soon after, the place of their leader's murder. Two weeks after Sitting Bull was killed, the United States' army massacred over 250 men, women, and children at Wounded Knee in South Dakota.

That spirit of resistance and perseverance against the legacy of colonization was alive and well in the Sacred Stone Camp. A Native American man wearing a red "Make America Native Again" hat was directing traffic in a congested field filled with cars as we tried to find some place to park. Upon entering the camp I am cussed out by someone for trying to take a picture and directed to a large tent hooked up to a generator and complete with a computer where each of my friends are interviewed by a white activist before being given a permit to take photographs.

When it is my turn to be interviewed she asks me why I am interested in the camp, what kind of story I am trying to write, where the story will be published, etc. My answers seem to satisfy her

and I am given permission to take photos and write about the camp. It was ignorance on my part for not doing enough research into the camp to know that we needed to go through a process to be allowed to document it.

But I was unsure at the time what kind of story I was trying to write, although I believed in the Sacred Stone Camp's mission of stopping the pipeline from crossing the Missouri River, was that enough? As a white man who grew up in Bismarck, the place where the pipeline had been rerouted to avoid contaminating their water supply in favor of jeopardizing Standing Rock's, could I ever be fully aware of how high the stakes had become?

You could sense the tension in the air, the Sacred Stone Camp was a prayer camp that also functioned as a resistance camp not only to the Dakota Access Pipeline, but to the larger frameworks of racism and colonization still at work against the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe at the hands of state and federal governments.

On the outskirts of the camp, I run into one of my friends, Allison, a Native American woman of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate tribe. Together we planned a protest outside of the Williston Basin Petroleum Conference in Bismarck last May where Donald Trump had been a keynote speaker. She is talking to Danielle, "Miss Indian World." They are picking wild sage while admiring a herd of buffalo. When I call them "bison" I am admonished. "We're close enough to the rez, you can call them buffaloes," Allison tells me.

I ask for permission to take Danielle's photograph, and she poses, powerfully, smiling below her crown, in her right hand a bushel of sage, buffaloes gathered in the distance. It is such a wonderful moment that I nearly forget that this is a few steps away from where Energy Transfer Partners had unleashed attack dogs on protestors trying to halt the desecration of what they believed to be a sacred burial site a few days earlier. Dina Gilio-Whitaker wrote in *As Long as the Grass Grows* that footage of one of the dog's mouth covered in blood went viral on social media and was "a chilling reminder of a history of brutality used against the Lakota Sioux by the US military." She also referred back to Christopher Columbus' genocide of the Taíno people, where attack dogs were used.

A letter from the Army Corps of Engineer's senior field archaeologist, Richard D. Harnois, detailed 5 recorded "cultural sites" that might be disturbed by the pipeline as well as over 30 others within a 1-mile radius of the construction site, varying from scattered artifacts, stone circles, to an earth lodge village (the traditional dwellings of the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara tribes) in a series of reports, only one site had been evaluated by the government for entry into the National Register. The reports also detail the inspection of Galpin Cemetery and an attempt to verify local reports of an exposed burial site that would be threatened by the pipeline with the help of LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, who has sadly since then passed away from cancer. Although no remains were found at the time, Allard was "committed to following up with her source for more information and later action."

Standing Rock's request for further archaeological surveys were denied. On September 3rd, the tribe publicly condemned Energy Transfer Partners for demolishing a two-mile-long area that the tribe's historic preservation officer, Tim Mentz, said contained "multiple graves and specific

prayer sites.” A few days later, on September 8th, Governor Jack Dalrymple would activate the National Guard to “monitor” demonstrations.

A day before Danielle would receive her crown, on April 29th, her tribe (Standing Rock) petitioned the US Army Corps of Engineers to do a more thorough study on the environmental impact the pipeline would have on the Missouri River. But they had been opposed to pipelines since 2012, and in a meeting with Energy Transfer Partners, an audio recording from September 30th, 2014 captured by the *Bismarck Tribune* showed that when informed that the Dakota Access Pipeline would cross less than a mile from the reservation’s border, they were concerned about damage to sacred sites and possible contamination of their water supply.

A man on horseback watched over us from a hill as we approached the entrance of the camp again, adorned with hundreds of tribal flags. In September, *NBC News* reported that over 300 federally recognized Native American tribes had come together at the Sacred Stone Camp. *The New York Times* called it “the largest, most diverse tribal action in at least a century, perhaps since the Little Bighorn.”

Allison is playing Brandy’s “The Boy is Mine” from her speakers. When she tells me I’m too young to know who Brandy is, I tell her one of my favorite songs of all time is “What About Us?” My friends and I sit on some lawn chairs and observe a prayer ceremony that has seemingly been going on for hours. I look over at Allison and Danielle and they seem to be at ease, enjoying the ceremony and the company of so many activists and friends. I cannot stop worrying about what will happen to everyone.

I have flashbacks to the protest at the Williston Basin Petroleum Conference where things started out so peacefully and ended with us being surrounded by a mob and people spitting and screaming, threatening, and for some, pushing and hitting. A nice lady with a clean shaven head told me to relax, that these kinds of things happen at protests. But I felt like my blood had turned to lead and I wished I had been born anywhere but Bismarck, anywhere but the center of this far-right, evangelical, anti-gay, anti-diversity, anti-abortion hate-parade. Half of the people who showed up to protest against Donald Trump’s keynote address had been friends of Allison’s, Native Americans who were opposed to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. To be honest, that was the first time I had heard about it. I was only beginning my descent into the madness of oil industry regulation activism in western North Dakota.

Now, in September 2016, it’s all anyone who cares about environmental activism can talk about, and it’s slowly taking over the national news as tensions escalate. As I sat there, in the lawn chair, listening to a language I didn’t understand (Lakota), but is native to the land I was born, I feel out of place mainly because I am so afraid. My friend, Mama, a photographer from Ghana, is smiling as she poses for a selfie with my other friend, Billy, who was, at the time, a gay rights activist from Mandan, is calm and collected as usual. We all met at the Williston Basin Petroleum protest.

Although I truly believe in environmental activism, I do not want to be attacked by a dog, or spayed with mace, or sit for even a day in Morton County’s makeshift prison-cells that are filled with people they have arrested for participating in pipeline protests. I can’t help but wonder why

it has come to this—why the authorities have resorted to such violent means of dealing with protestors, “Water Protectors,” as some prefer to be known.

The Sacred Stone Camp is a massive expanse of teepees, tents, cars, and campers from people all over the continent. This was a place where borders were irrelevant—the bottom line that united everyone was the belief that access to clean drinking water was a right far more important than oil. Various signs throughout the camp read “you can’t drink oil,” “water is sacred,” and “mni wiconi” which is Lakota for “water is life.”

After such an unprecedented display of unity, resistance, and perseverance against the pipeline by Standing Rock and their allies in the face of such violence, aggression, derision, and injustice displayed by Energy Transfer Partners and their militarized police force, I wonder how our government’s leaders could have turned a blind-eye, how they could be so desensitized and shameless in their further exploitation and destruction of Native American’s livelihoods.

Why were those who lived on the reservation considered expendable in the extraction and transport of fossil fuels, but the metropolitan areas surrounding Bismarck were spared? If an environmental assessment deemed the pipeline a risk to the drinking water of a predominantly white community, what was being done to ensure that the drinking water of Native Americans and the preservation of important cultural sites would not be compromised?

The timing of the pipeline crossing the Missouri River in the lead-up to a contentious presidential election could not have been more unfortunate. Hillary Clinton was trapped between some (certainly not all) labor unions who supported the pipeline in its creation of jobs and Native Americans and environmentally conscious voters who believed the pipeline jeopardized Standing Rock’s drinking water and would further contribute to climate change.

Native American activists set up a teepee right inside Clinton’s campaign headquarters in New York City, urging her to make a statement of opposition to the pipeline. A political organization named Our Revolution, born out of Bernie Sander’s campaign, issued a statement, “There is one person who will have the power to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline: Secretary Hillary Clinton. If she is to be our next president, she will have the power to stop the pipeline. And our best opportunity to get her to oppose it is before the election.”

Clinton’s response was steadfast in its neutrality (when she wasn’t refusing to talk about it at all), “It’s important that on the ground in North Dakota, everyone respects demonstrators’ rights to protest peacefully, and workers’ rights to do their jobs safely,” Tyrone Gayle, a spokesperson for her campaign, said briefly. In other words, the Water Protectors assembled at the Sacred Stone Camp should just sit back and watch as the pipeline workers plow through cultural sites that are important to them, and threaten their future generations’ access to clean drinking water.

Barrack Obama, in one of the few visits made to a reservation ever by a sitting US President, travelled to Cannon Ball with the First Lady in 2014 promising to work on ways to further economic and educational development on Native American lands. In one of his last actions as President in December, he would bring construction of the pipeline to a halt, angering North Dakota’s Republican Representative Kevin Cramer, who labeled Obama “lawless” in a statement

that went on to say, “I’m encouraged we will restore law and order next month, when we get a President who will not thumb his nose at the rule of law.” Alex Seitz-Wald writing for *NBC News*, reported that President-elect Donald Trump had not only invested his own money into the pipeline, but received a \$100,000 donation to his campaign from the CEO of Energy Transfer Partners. Once inaugurated, he would select a member of Energy Transfer Partners’ board to be his energy secretary.

In the events leading up to Obama’s decision, on September 9th, U.S. district Judge James Boasberg wrote, “the United States’ relationship with the Indian tribes has been contentious and tragic” as he denied Standing Rock’s request for construction on the pipeline to stop. Later in October, Energy Transfer Partners would proceed with construction. Morton County police would arrest nearly 30 protestors at the construction site.

It’s here where things start to get horrifying, and something I would never have foreseen happening so close to my home. On November 20th, They moved from attack dogs to tear gas and spraying a group of about 400 people with a water cannon in temperatures that had dropped to below freezing. Amy Sisk would report for *Prairie Public* that “protest leaders were concerned about hypothermia” and medical personnel at the camp were overwhelmed by the injuries so that “the local community of Cannon Ball opened their school gymnasium for emergency relief.”

It seemed that the best option North Dakota law enforcement had decided on for dealing with protestors was to make them potentially freeze to death in a place far from any hospital, and to make matters worse, a burning vehicle (it was inconclusive who started the fire, unless you want to take the police’s word for it) would block the bridge providing access to their camp, blocking the way of ambulances. Protestors said the police had intentionally barricaded access to the camp with the car, and that they were attempting to move it when police began spraying them with water.

“It was chaotic, dark, freezing” said Jade Begay, spokeswoman for the *Indigenous Environmental Network*, who says she and others gathered for a peaceful demonstration that turned to chaos “caused by the police and their law enforcement putting out the noise cannons, spraying people with water.” In a video of the incident, people can be heard screaming “water is life” as they protest. The Standing Rock Medic and Healer Council criticized the “potentially lethal use of these confrontational methods against people peacefully assembled.” In response to Morton County Police’s spokeswoman Donnel Hushka’s insistence that the water cannons were being used to put out fires started by protestors while also admitting they were being used to control the crowd, Begay said police were “paint[ing] their own picture. They don’t need to be meeting us with mace and rubber bullets when we are nonviolent. There is no form of aggression or violence.” Atsa E’sha Hoferer, a member of the Paiute tribe, said that if any fires were started by protestors, it was a desperate attempt to keep warm.

Fires burned ominously in the background as police shot rubber bullets and water on demonstrators, and various news outlets speculated over why the fires were started, with Morton County Police laying the blame on protestors and protestors laying the blame on police. LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, one of the founders of the Sacred Stone Camp, would say in a letter

to *The Guardian*, “from the beginning, we at Standing Rock gathered in a spirit of prayer and non-violent resistance to the destruction of our homeland and culture. We came together with our ceremonies, songs and drums. Weapons are not allowed into our camps.”

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, mere days before Donald Trump’s inauguration, bringing with it the promise that construction on the Dakota Access Pipeline would be renewed, police responded to protests with renewed aggression. Police charged and arrested 16 demonstrators, that they believed were trespassing and rioting. Activists said in honor of Martin Luther King Jr., they planned to peacefully walk toward the construction site of the pipeline and then to Backwater bridge, where protestors had been sprayed with water cannons by police on November 20th. The bridge had since then been occupied by police who were refusing to let anyone pass, including emergency services.

Nataanii Means, a hip-hop artist from the Oglala Lakota tribe, witnessed police fire rubber bullets as well as tear gas at protestors, he said “It was a lot of violence for unarmed water protectors.” Johnny Dangers, a photographer at the scene, said police “just started pushing into people.” Irina Lukban, an activist at the scene, said she received a concussion after being hit on the head by a National Guard soldier with his shield, who then continued to shoot her with rubber bullets. Nataanii Means told *The Guardian* “We’re acting in prayer, I don’t know why they keep reacting in violence.”

Why then, was such brutal military force exercised at Standing Rock? Antonia Juhasz reported for the *Pacific Standard* that TigerSwan, a private security firm “with experience fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan launched an intrusive military-style surveillance and counterintelligence campaign against the activists and their allies [...] label[ing] the protestors ‘jihadists.’” The Sacred Stone Camp would hold out until February 23rd, 2017 when the national guard and law enforcement officers would march through the camp, guns pointing, helicopter flying, heavy machinery bulldozing, arresting any remaining demonstrators on the pretense that flooding in the spring would pose a danger to those living in the camp.

Linda Black Elk, a member of the Catawba tribe, speaking to *The Guardian*, said that “I’ve been watching police officers use knives to cut tipis and point their guns inside blindly.” The North Dakota Department of Emergency Services sent out a tweet with a photograph of the decimated camp with the hashtag “#NoDapl #YesDapl,” as if even after all but bombing the camp out of existence there was still a need for the appearance of neutrality. Tom Goldtooth, director of the *Indigenous Environmental Network*, said that the seizure and destruction of the camp was a “violent and unnecessary infringement on the constitutional right of water protectors to peacefully protest and exercise their freedom of speech.” A few hours later, the newly elected governor of North Dakota, Doug Burgum, signed laws into place passed in response to the Dakota Access Pipeline protests that had to do with trespassing, rioting, and wearing facemasks. A bill that would make it legal to run over protestors with a car did not pass.

I refused to go to any protests after what happened at Standing Rock until 2021. Even though I was not physically there when protestors were being sprayed with water cannons, shot with rubber bullets, sprayed with mace, etc.—I felt traumatized. For years I dreaded to reexperience the senseless violence and hatred that unfolded first-hand at the Williston Basin Petroleum

Conference, and on a much larger scale at Standing Rock which I am lucky to have only witnessed through videos, photos, and news articles. Many of the protestors report a sense of trauma after the event, and it saddens me because these people are not monsters and did not deserve to be treated so indignantly.

I witnessed first-hand at the Williston Basin Petroleum Conference how and why some protests turn violent. I remember trying to ask one of the protestors to stay on the sidewalk, because the police officers had asked us to stay there with our signs far away from the guests, but he insisted on antagonizing someone with a Trump hat. That's probably the last few seconds I remember of things going smoothly. In a few moments, we were surrounded by Trump supporters, and police were ordering us to leave the site—only we couldn't, not without coming into direct contact with what was growing into an angry mob.

And we were certainly outnumbered. Next thing I knew, people were screaming that they were being hit, spit on, grabbed. I remember the nervous girl who I promised nothing would go wrong to crying because someone had grabbed her sign away. I remember my friend Hannah's eyes wide in disbelief or fear at how quickly things had descended into turmoil. And of course, I remember the words of the nice clean-shaven-head-lady telling me soothingly that things would be alright, that these sorts of things happen at protests.

In the case of Standing Rock, I was not physically there to see who started the fires or who reportedly threw rocks, water bottles, etc. at police to prompt them to retaliate. What I witnessed in September 2016 was a peaceful, organized prayer camp filled with people from all over the continent that were camping out in teepees, tents, and campers—a lot of them brought their horses, some of them were picking sage, admiring the buffalo, asking (nicely) that I put my camera away, or to be careful not to walk in certain areas they considered sacred, some of them were cooking, dancing, and of course praying.

It is my conviction that the people of this prayer camp did not deserve to be labeled “jihadists” and treated as such by a private security firm with experience fighting wars in the Middle East. I think the “information checkpoint” was unnecessary. I believe the reports of many witnesses who saw police trying to incite a riot as they injured members of a peaceful protest. I believe that my friend, Allison, who was at the camp during the height of the violence, could very well be dead from the brutality of the police—or the military—whatever you want to call the attack force that descended upon people trying to fight for clean water to drink. I believe that when police were stabbing knives into teepees, they really didn't care if there were people still inside. Unlike the government officials of North Dakota, I do not feel the need for the appearance of neutrality on this issue.