

SOLIVAGANT

By Megann Kammerman

WHY WE LIKE IT:

‘Solivagant’ means to wander alone, to ramble around by one’s self. What intrigued us about this CNF is how the author handles the theme on two levels—both with respect to her rambles abroad and at the same time her longing for the familiar. This is given weight by the use of the passive voice—which always creates a sense of distance—from the character, from the reader. The work of a young writer, the voice is startlingly mature—like she’s been putting thoughts to paper for eons. The wistful mood that runs throughout this tale is complex and multi-faceted, embracing a spectrum of tones, beautiful but difficult to pin down. Prose is sonorous.

Quote:

You like the singer’s messy hair and plaid button-up. You like his nasal-y voice. The drummer sits to the left, lights reflecting off the lenses of his glasses; even perched behind the drums, you can tell he’s tall. On the other side stands the second guitarist, with sparkling eyes and fuzzy brown hair.

And...

You stick headphones in your ears and listen to Bombadil as loud as you can and drink cocoa with foamy milk and crack pistachios after sucking off the salt as a light rain pitter patters on the glass outside. Your open notebook lies untouched while the sky grows darker and strings of patio lights slowly begin to glow in the dimming gray light.

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The Street

You walk the streets of downtown Madison.

Old brick buildings tower over the cafes, bookstores, and tourist shops that line the sidewalk. The sky is overcast but the air is warm and it feels like spring despite the lack of sun. You don't know where you're going, alone for the first time traversing a strange city, but know you're excited to get there.

With your flannel around your waist and backpack over your shoulders, you know you look the part of the tourist, but don't much care. Holding your phone up to your nose, you try to orient yourself among the web of crazy-angled roads on the screen. You think, "I'm going to have to go into the map," then laugh at your Friends reference, wishing that your sister was here to appreciate it. There are no cars, but enough pedestrians and bikers to make up the difference. Students rush by on skateboards, eating their food-cart lunches from styrofoam boxes. You pass a guy wearing full climbing gear and wonder if there's a rock wall nearby.

A girl with dreads stands on the edge of the sidewalk, waving stacks of papers covered in brightly drawn flowers at passerby. Stopping to look through her work, you find one you like and buy it. You ask her to sign it and then talk about different types of painting techniques while she slowly letters her name with a shaking hand. You find it a strange to be the outgoing, less awkward half of the conversation.

You wonder if she would get your Friends reference, but aren't brave enough to ask.

Slipping the drawing into your notebook, you move on down the street. You pass dark back alleys and vine-covered brick buildings and shop fronts filled with knick knacks and art.

You've never wandered a city alone before, and aren't quite sure where to go. You've never checked into a hotel on your own either. Or planned your own vacation. Or had to budget

the money for an entire trip. And yet you just did, you remind yourself. You can do this alone, too.

You're excited to seize another chance to step further out of your comfort zone.

When you see an outdoor store down a side block, you cross the road. Stepping inside, you smile at the lady behind the counter. She smiles back and says hello, her tone a perfect match to the now-shining spring sun outside—warm and bright and cheery. She looks like someone you could talk to easily.

Noticing the rack of climbing gear, you ask if there's a local place where people go climbing. You talk back and forth for a bit, for once not looking for an excuse to end a conversation. Finally, you turn away to wander the store, proud of the simple exchange. You run your fingers over the fabrics—nylon and wool and polyester—until you find a North Face hat you like because you figure you should buy something after spending so much time talking to the lady.

You leave the store, still smiling, pulling your new hat on your head. Picking a direction, you buckle your pack and start walking under the bright sun—which is not in your eyes at all.

The sun passes behind another wall of clouds as you pass an open door to a hole-in-the-wall bar. You can hear the whine of a guitar and the bass of drums, and a sign next to the door advertises live music. You decide to go in because you can and you love live music and the name of the band, Bombadil, tells you that they must be Lord of the Rings fans.

You go inside and find a place in the back of the crowd next to a wall of layered stickers, peeled and faded, under strings of tiny glimmering lights. The stage above is small enough that the three musicians make it feel cramped, made smaller by dark walls and low ceiling and

cracked wooden floor. The light is dim and pulsing, the air thick with smoke and the scent of beer.

You like the singer's messy hair and plaid button-up. You like his nasal-y voice. The drummer sits to the left, lights reflecting off the lenses of his glasses; even perched behind the drums, you can tell he's tall. On the other side stands the second guitarist, with sparkling eyes and fuzzy brown hair.

You listen, smiling and tapping along, feeling like you know the words even though you don't yet, already knowing that you're going to buy their music. Finally the last song falls into silence. The band set aside their instruments, bow to clamorous applause, and turn to leave the stage.

After the concert, you buy a CD from the foldout table in the back. When you finally squeeze yourself out of the press of the crowd, you find yourself facing the drummer. You were right. He is tall. He smiles and thanks you for listening to them. Swallowing your nervousness, you let yourself be drawn into conversation.

"I'm from Arizona, originally," you say when asked. It doesn't matter that right now you're going to school in Iowa—when you're in Madison, Wisconsin it's all some form of distant.

He laughs slowly, "Really? How funny! We're driving around in a rental car with an Arizona license plate."

You smile with the stranger at the coincidence. What an odd thing, to find a bit of home so far from where it belongs.

Hours later you find yourself in the library, climbing the marble stairs to the top floor surrounded by the scent of old paper.

The stairs lead to a huge room. The ceiling rises far above your head, and the two full walls of glass flood the space with light. You glance around and, seeing no one, walk over to the far wall to a view of the downtown streets and the roofs of the looming buildings that seemed so tall when standing below.

The capital peeks over the buildings just across the street. You can see a photo there, through the glass, framed in the edges of the window panes, and wish you had your camera. You watch a pair of men walk by on the sidewalk under the window. A biker. A group of students. You can't hear them—the only sound is the distant rumble of the library below.

You have the strangest desire to run up the rusted fire escapes, over the crumbling chimneys, and across the rows of rooftops on a path that no one else can follow.

Being adventurous is exhausting, you think, wondering if it would be worth it to take your sweaty shoes off of your sore feet. Too awkward, you decide, if someone should walk past. You hope no one does. Your social energy meter has bottomed out, and you don't ever want to talk to anyone ever again. You want a nap. In your own bed. But you're in the middle of a city, alone, hundreds of miles from your own bed.

Luckily, libraries always have the best nooks and crannies to hide away from chatty strangers and prying eyes. No matter what city you're in.

You sit at the corner table, and set your pack at your feet and pull off your new hat, rustling your fingers through your hair because you like it messy. A dictionary sits on the glass table next to your elbow. Why do people always leave those lying around, you think, as if we don't have Google?

You take out your iPad and headphones and notebook. Pulling up YouTube, you search the name of your favorite song from the concert earlier.

With the music on repeat, you dig for a pen and flip to a fresh page in your now battered notebook. You glance up as a group of people pass by—up the stairs and across to offices down a hall. You silently warn them away from your corner and manage to refrain from glaring at them.

You alternate writing, playing on YouTube and staring out the glass, focusing on nothing in particular as the afternoon lengthens. The chimneys and fire escapes are silhouetted shadows against the grey sky; you can still see that photo in the rustic bricks and the angular shape of the metal stairs.

You get bored. You crack the dictionary sitting on the glass table, and read the definition of the first word you see, and smile.

Solivagant.

Wandering alone.

Maybe you can do this travel thing after all.

The sun peeks out from behind the clouds to shine through the glass and warm your always-frozen fingers as you begin to pack up, using the flower drawing as your bookmark.

The Dojo

Ikkyo. Nikyo. Sankyō. You stretch your wrists through the easy rhythm of warm-ups and feel your nerves begin to settle, comforted by the simple routine.

The Madison Aikido dojo is in a long, low building, with a large canvas mat taking up the center of the space. Wooden beams line the walls and kanji writing is sprinkled on signs

hanging along the edges of the room. Racks of neatly stacked bokkens cover the back wall and at the head of the mat is the same photograph of O'Sensei that hangs in your home dojo.

You'd been nervous to come here at first—to show up at a strange dojo in a strange city and practice with strange people. But despite the nerves that shook your hands, you bowed at the door and took off your shoes—confident at least in those small customs—and introduced yourself as a visiting Aikidoka.

Now you follow the class through the same stretches you do back home before every practice. You don't have to think about the motions and so find yourself watching the other students. Over a dozen. Most of them black-belts. You look at the Sensei—an older lady who seems oddly familiar.

She claps and you line up with the rest of the students on the edge of the mat, kneeling in a long row of dark blue hakamas and white gis and a smattering of grey sweatpants. You watch as she demonstrates a technique. *Kotegaeshi*. You feel yourself relax further, relieved that you won't have to learn something new just yet.

Partners and practice. You turn to the girl to your left, bow and say, "Onegai shimasu." You both move to an unoccupied corner of the mat and face each other, feet braced, hands up.

She's new to Aikido, dressed in loose-fitting workout clothes and laughs nervously as she tells you she doesn't know this technique very well. So you go first, pinning her to the mat after she hesitantly attacks. And again. Then it's her turn and you find yourself walking her through the technique. Foot here. Arm up. Throw. It's a stark reminder of how far you've come these past two years. You feel your confidence rise.

The Sensei claps. You move on to the next technique, the next partner. Thoughts fall away and you are left with only motion. Step here. Grab and twist with your hips. Lower your

center. Adjust and repeat and do your best to ignore your shaking legs and complaining muscles and dry mouth.

You pair off for the final time; a technique you've never done before. You brace your feet and settle your center once again, arms up, focused on the man in front of you. He is ginger-haired and gangly and tall—taller than you, which is unusual.

You attack. Get pinned. Attack. Pin. Then it's your turn and you fumble. You do it wrong again. Your partner is patient, letting you find the movement.

He strikes, a blow to your head. Block. Turn. Get underneath and pin. You end up with your leg too close to his free hand. He grabs your calf to show you he saw the advantage as well. You wince at the slip and nod and focus and try it again. You get it right.

Then the Sensei claps for the last time and you line up between two people who are now a little less than strangers. You bow, heavy with sweat and mouth dry.

After class you find yourself talking to the Sensei; she asks, "Were you at the seminar in Iowa City last fall?" You smile and nod, realizing why she'd looked so familiar. It seems Aikido circles run far smaller than you'd thought. When it's time to leave, she tells you that you're welcome to come back anytime you're in town and that she hopes to see you at the next seminar.

You step out of the dojo onto the darkened streets and raise your face to the spring chilled wind and feel a bit better about being on your own in a strange city.

The Cafe

You pause at the door of the cafe and take a breath of petrichor and coffee.

Quiet music. The sound of foaming coffee and the rumble of conversation. The wall is painted in rich colors, reds and blues and yellowish browns, and an electric fireplace stands in the center, a circle of cushioned seats surrounding the ring of stones. The warmth of the fire chases away the chill of the spring rain falling outside.

This late, only a few people sit sprinkled at tables throughout the shop, focused on their food or conversation or cramming for class, holding large earthen mugs that mold to their hands. All fellow coffee drinkers and quiet thinkers, gathered in this port in the rain.

You find a table as far away from them as possible.

You order cocoa and unpack your backpack—you're getting tired of carrying everything around with you—and settle down with your back to the rest of the room in an out-of-the-way nook. Even those hours in the library yesterday hadn't given you enough of a recharge for you to feel up for more exploration. You don't think you can handle anything more right now. No people. No walking. No writing. You take out your notebook anyway, if only to look busy so no one will talk to you.

If it were up to you, you'd stay curled in your room with the drapes closed for the rest of the evening, but you feel obligated to at least leave the motel on your last night of the trip.

You miss your cats. Your bed. Your sister.

Stupid city. Stupid traveling.

There's another Aikido class in an hour, but you don't want to go. You feel guilty for skipping, and alternate between trying to convince yourself, "it's okay to take it easy tonight" and, "stop being so lazy and just do it."

You're tired. And somehow twice as sore as you were yesterday. You're leaving tomorrow and won't get another chance to go ever. Finally, you let the weather decide. The rain

grows louder and thunder rumbles in the distance and you very much want to sit here until it's dry outside.

Eventually, you're chased from your out-of-the-way seat by a large group with a meeting planned. You smile pleasantly, grumbling something decidedly un-pleasant in your head as you gather up your stuff and move to the other side of the cafe.

You're now sitting in a high backed lounge chair facing away from the most of the other people. You suppose it's more comfortable than your previous nook, and decide to forgive the annoying group.

You glance at the clock. Aikido has already started. Decision final. So you take off your sweatshirt and cross your legs, giving up all pretense of productivity. You're still happy with your adventurous spirit on this trip, but you're even more happy to be going home tomorrow.

You stick headphones in your ears and listen to Bombadil as loud as you can and drink cocoa with foamy milk and crack pistachios after sucking off the salt as a light rain pitter patters on the glass outside. Your open notebook lies untouched while the sky grows darker and strings of patio lights slowly begin to glow in the dimming gray light.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This essay came about during a trip I took to Madison, Wisconsin for a Travel Writing class in the spring of 2017. It was the first time I'd ever had the chance to travel on my own, without my family making all the plans.*

I'm a pretty introverted and shy person normally, but during this trip I had the chance to be more outgoing, independent, and adventurous than really comes naturally to me. It was exhilarating. I met people I never would have met otherwise. Found a new favorite band. Went to Aikido classes at a strange dojo. I found pieces of home and familiarity in a city I'd never visited.

But it didn't magically change who I was. There were times during the trip when I was just fed up and drained and wanted to do nothing more than crawl into a hole to get away from people. That became the heart of my essay—the adventure of traveling and discovering a new city, but also the desire to return to the familiarity and solitude of home, and how both can exist side by side.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Megann is a writer, editor, and artist specializing in the fantasy and science fiction genre. She is a graduate of the BFA in Creative & Professional Writing program at Maharishi University of Management, and has recently published a children's book, *Bellow of the Beast*. Visit her website at megannk.com.*

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