

Wisconsin₀₀₀

By Thomas Cook

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WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

My chip in this bet is to explain to you why you should read on, and I'll take the over vs. the under on this piece.

A story before the story: I grew up in all of Northern Illinois, and, by that, I mean my family lived 30 minutes off of the Wisconsin border and we traveled to where Cook resides now, Galesburg, IL, because a brother of mine played hockey. I say that to say this, the silence in Midwesterners, as with other stoic folk, as that adjective is not lost upon others, is mutually bred. There will be two to tango, and, when words fail, what is there left to say? In silence we find subtext, and, in silence, we find meaning. Foibles aside, the tang can be sharp, and, in our oftentimes misguided silence, you can reach the hilt – where it will ultimately hurt.

Cook uses a written mirror. The problem with his characters are that they are running parallel and not reflective of each other. Each is a writer, one poetic, one novelistic. Each has a concept of the inner workings of the university system (something, I think, the author holds close to his heart and career), one getting the trappings and one disillusioned. Each wants to succeed, but one is progressing where the other is stagnant. These two people reflect each other in the same sense that a mirror needs an object to reflect, without the object there is no image to be perceived. Friction is calamity. That is the relationship with Cook's characters, one without the other doesn't know how to exist, and that is the breaking point of their time using each other to configure an ideal that neither of them can fathom when they look back.

If you look in a mirror enough, do you see the changes you've wrought or do you see the same person staring back at you? They live in a funhouse in which no mirror reflects the person they are anymore, and, by association, neither can see what, in fuck all's sake, they were looking at in the first place nor the perfection of shape that was originally presented.

Therein lies the key to this story. Where one character sees, and reflects upon where they want to be, the other knows damn well the same thing. They are writers that can no longer write together. They are lovers where there is no love but dependency on the space they give each

other to create. They are creators, dead in the water, with full knowledge being in a landlocked part of the world begat the singular reason for why they can no longer stand to be working on the same ship. They're broken with or without each other.

In the silence of Cook's dialogue, the reader sits, and you can hear the words unspoken.

If you've ever been in an M.F.A. program and had to split your life in half, then read this story. If you've ever sat in silence while your significant other stared back, then read this story. If you've ever moved artifacts of your life for someone else, then read this story. If you've ever asked someone you love to read something you wrote even though it broke your heart to write it, then read this story. If you have ever lost someone and knew that you would have to watch them drift into the horizon a better person than you, then read this story. If you read, then don't stop now. If you read, then listen.

This is not a perfect, literary, idealization. You should read this for the dialogue, which reflects an artifice that is spoken when two people have nothing left to say – because the story, at times, can be tightened. Admittedly and pensively, Cook's, "Wisconsin," reminds me of me. How many times have I left something unsaid when I should've spoken? How many times should I have told someone that I loved them as opposed to being a puss and stayed clammed up like a cunt?

The answer is that I shouldn't have, but I suggest trusting this dumb cunt.

Enjoy Thomas Cook's work. I did.

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)

"I'm going to get water; do you want any?"

"I'm going to have crackers; do you want any?"

"I'm going to make coffee; would you drink some?"

The woman's mother made money and the woman's father did not. Both the woman's mother and the woman's father had the mental faculty required to work jobs where there was money to be made, but the woman's mother committed to such work while the woman's father did not. The woman's father was quiet. He occasionally played bridge against himself. The woman's mother was loud. She often organized family-wide recreation events.

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The man and the woman had already made the decision to end their relationship. When they were happy, they were happy about the decision to end their relationship, and, to one another, they affirmed the fact that it was because they had made the decision that they were happy.

“It really is smart.”

“It’s the right thing.”

“It is. It totally is. You’re right.”

“It’s hard, but do I feel like we’re making the right decision.”

“I know.”

“I mean, you think we’re making the right decision, right?”

“Of course I do. We’ve been talking about it, and we’ve been being thoughtful about it. I mean, it’s not practical to keep dating after you move. Long distance would be terrible.”

“We’ve both done that before.”

“Exactly. And did it work?”

“It was terrible.”

“We’ll be happier this way.”

“We’ll be happier.”

The man told himself that, for his part, the decision to end their relationship was unrelated to the woman's cold hands, which had always bothered him. He woke up feeling three small frogs stuck to his stomach. The woman told herself that, for her part, the decision to end their relationship was unrelated to the man's offensive humor, which had always bothered her. She braced herself each time he attempted a witticism. The man also told himself that, for his part, the decision to end their relationship was unrelated to the woman's former depression, which he worried would haunt their children, if they should have children. He imagined having to tell the kids that mommy needs to be alone. The woman also told herself that, for her part, the decision to end the relationship was unrelated to the man's former dipsomania, which she worried would haunt their children, if they should have children. She imagined having to tell the kids that daddy needs to lie down. Instead, they told themselves that the decision to end the relationship was based on the fact that the woman was leaving, and the man wanted to stay.

When they weren't happy about the decision to end their relationship, however, they didn't talk about it. They were aware that if they were to talk about not ending their relationship, if they were to talk about trying to have a long-distance relationship and voice opinions contrary to the decision to end their relationship, that they would compromise not only the peace of their last weeks together but, they could perhaps cast a pall over the entire preceding relationship. It was better not to talk about it. What if those opinions contrary to the decision to end the relationship brought us back together, and I was sentenced to remember all the inaccurate things she said about Italian wines? What if those opinions contrary to the decision to end the relationship brought us back together, and I was sentenced to remember all the foolish things he said about Spaghetti

Westerns? So, when they weren't happy about their decision to end the relationship, they talked about their writing instead:

"How is your writing coming?"

"I'm struggling. I'm not motivated. How's yours?"

"Not so good. I think I need to focus for a while this afternoon, so I may not want to make dinner."

"That's fine. I want to focus too."

Only this month, after they'd decided that she would move away to Wisconsin, where she had been offered a job, did they truly decide that they would end their relationship, and did she move in to the man's apartment; her lease had ended, and she wanted to spend as much time with the man as she could before her job began in the fall. She was going to get another degree. For their final weeks, they lived in two small rooms that the man had been living in for years. There was a small electric stove, a sink, and two cabinets in one corner of the apartment. There was a door that led to a standing shower stall. There was also a bedroom. The man wrote while sitting on his couch, putting his laptop on the coffee table in front of him. With the fuel of cigarettes and Diet Coke throughout the day, he was tireless, he said, but the woman never heard his fingers on the keys. The woman worked with her laptop in her lap sitting in a big chair in the bedroom. With the promise of movies and popcorn at the end of the day, she was tireless, she said, but the man never heard her fingers on the keys. Every hour or so one of them would get up and stride noisily toward the corner of the apartment that functioned as the kitchen, get some water or a snack, and stride noisily back to a laptop.

Since she'd started living in the apartment, she'd noticed the dust on the ceiling's molding. She'd noticed that the man never wiped out the sink after he dumped a can of food into a colander, either. She'd also noticed that the window that faced State Street showed only the trash cans of the houses closer to the street. She worried that since the man's father had died that he'd decided to live like a hermit. She worried that he too quickly agreed to the decision to end the relationship so that he could hibernate. Since she'd started living at the apartment, he'd noticed that all the woman's underwear was very old. He'd noticed that she never wiped out the sink after she spit toothpaste, either. He'd also noticed that when he tried to downplay her anxiety she scolded him like he was a child. He worried that, like the woman's mother, she would be excessively committed to professionalizing herself. He worried that she too quickly agreed to the decision to end the relationship so that she could bury herself in work.

"I'm going to get water; do you want any?"

"I'm going to have crackers; do you want any?"

"I'm going to make coffee; would you drink some?"

Each of them, the man and the woman, had advanced degrees. They wrote stories and poems and essays and published them in university and independent presses. The woman had published a book of poems. The man was trying to get an agent to represent his novel. It was only a matter of time, they believed, until one of them landed the job that would change one of their lives. Part of the decision to end the relationship was based on the man's assertion that he had a better chance of finding representation for his novel where they were living than he did where the woman was planning to live; if the man found representation for and published his novel, he would have a good chance of

finding a job that would change his life. There was a small part of the woman that was afraid the man would flounder. Another part of the decision to end the relationship was based on the woman's assertion that she would have a better chance of publishing more poems and writing the poetry scholarship that she wanted to write if she moved to Wisconsin to take the teaching job; if she could publish more poems and write more scholarship on poems, she would have a good chance of finding an even better job that would change her life. There was a small part of the man that worried one day the woman would find all her pursuits arbitrary.

The time was coming for the woman to move her things, which had been in storage, to the place she was planning to live. They packed up all of her things and rented a car and drove all the woman's things to the place she was planning to live, which was halfway across the country. It was a very scenic drive, but it was too far to drive in one day. The woman's parents lived between where the man and the woman had been living and where the woman was planning to live, in another part of Wisconsin, so the man and the woman stopped to spend one night with her parents on their way to place where the woman was planning to live. The woman's parents greeted them and hugged them: The woman's mother hugged both her daughter and the man. The woman's father hugged his daughter and shook the man's hand. The woman's parents had only met the man once, a year ago, when the woman's book of poetry had been released and there was a reading at a cafe. The man had never been to the woman's house, even though the woman had visited his home dozens of times throughout the years of their relationship.

The woman's mother made money and the woman's father did not. Both the woman's mother and the woman's father had the mental faculty required to work jobs

where there was money to be made, but the woman's mother committed to such work while the woman's father did not. The woman's father was quiet. He occasionally played bridge against himself. The woman's mother was loud. She often organized family-wide recreation events. There was also the woman's brother, who was damaged in a severe and undefinable way; he still lived at home. The mother had spent money trying to find out what was wrong with her son, but there was no diagnosis. The woman had explained the fact of her brother to the man on the drive. Before the drive the man only knew that the brother lived at home, not that he was damaged in a severe and undefinable way. At dinner, the brother cursed his mother under his breath each time the mother spoke.

"So, was the drive scenic?"

"Bitch bitch, shut up shut up."

"What time will you have to leave in the morning?"

"Cunt cunt cunt."

The brother also cursed at his sister ("Still a fucking whore still a fucking whore") and the man ("Sister's Fuck Boy Sister's Fuck Boy").

No one said anything about the cursing. After dinner, the brother apologized to each member of the family with great aplomb. He required constant care, and one of the reasons that the woman had taken the job in Wisconsin, a drive away, was so that she could help her aging parents with the constant care of her older but damaged brother.

The man and the woman slept in separate beds that night, and they continued on to the place the woman was planning to live the next morning. As they fell asleep, they rehearsed the story that they had told themselves.

"This is really right for you. The job, being near your brother."

“He doesn’t mean anything he says. You’re right. He has a limited way of expressing himself. What he said was anxiety.”

“I wasn’t thinking about it. Your parents seem good. It’s good to have spent more time with them.”

“They like you. They wonder why you’re not moving here with me.”

“Well, we talked about it.”

“I know.”

“It’s best for both of us.”

“It is.”

“Think about the writing we’ll be able to do.”

“Do you think we should visit each other, even if we’re not dating?”

In the morning, they drove to the next town in Wisconsin and they unpacked the woman’s things in the new place. They were only moving her in, so the man asked where things were supposed to go. She said she would have plenty of time to arrange things when she started living in the new place. Then, they drove back halfway across the country to the man’s apartment without stopping to spend any more time with the woman’s family. When they got back to the man’s apartment, they had one week left. They both knew that if they tried to keep their relationship alive after the woman left that they would fail.

Now, when they weren’t happy about the decision to end their relationship, they started to talk about it. They started to voice opinions contrary to the decision to end their relationship and they compromised the peace of their last week.

“Maybe we could do it. I mean, wouldn’t it be worth it?”

“No, I mean, I do think it would, but think about it. Phone calls. Flights. We’ll both be trying to write.”

“It will be impossible.”

“But we could try.”

“We could, right?”

“We tried it before, though, with other people.”

“And we totally failed.”

“We did fail.”

During the last week, the confidence of making the decision to end their relationship was gone. They didn’t know what they wanted. When they talked about ending the relationship, it sounded hollow. They went out to eat at the places that they’d eaten when they first started dating, they drank water and ate crackers while they didn’t write—each time they celebrated the end and talked about how if they tried it might not be the end. They rented a car again and they drove to the airport.

On the drive, they talked about politics, which neither of them understood. The airport was smaller than either of them remembered. There was only one lane for departures and there was no traffic. They pulled right up to curb next to the only other car, a policeman. There were ninety minutes until the flight.

[END]

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Sometimes the world collapses, and everything in it is meant to be there, and everything speaks to everything else. In those moments, when a sentence comes to be, follow it.*

AUTHOR BIO: Thomas Cook's fiction has appeared in *Bennington Review*, *Big Muddy*, and *Chicago Quarterly Review* among others. He is the author of *Light Through a Pane of Glass*, and since 2009 he has been Editor and Publisher of *Tammy* and *Tammy* chapbooks. He teaches in the MFA program at Mount St. Mary's University in Los Angeles.