

Starry Night

When the sky is really dark, clear but not much moon, the stars take over the night. If you look across the I-220 bridge back at Shreveport from our little cove on the south shore of Cross Lake, you can feel like you're on the edge of Van Gogh's "Starry Night over the Rhone." Not that other "Starry Night," at the café, or the one with the village. Those are okay, but the starlight on the water does it for me.

I can't remember the first time I ever came out here. It was my uncle's fish camp and he and my dad used to bring me out here. Uncle Zach never married, so when he died, Dad got it. Now Dad's gone too and it's going to be mine. We could have sold it lots of times, especially after the fancy houses started going in a little ways east of here, but Zach and Dad didn't need the money. I could use some help with my student loans but I'd also like to hold on to the property.

I've loved the night view over the water, back to the bridge, all my life. When I was just a kid sometimes I'd squirrel away in my closet and think about that when Mom got to yelling, or later when she was sick and crying all the time. For a long time, after she had to go away and it was just Dad and me, at night I pretended I was

camping out at the lake. I guess because she wasn't expected to be there I didn't miss her so much if I imagined I was at the lake, with the stars. And when I got bored in classes, I doodled the outline of that bridge or the vaulted arches underneath it, like a cathedral.

My French teacher had a lot of famous paintings as posters she rotated on her walls during the year. When "Starry Night over the Rhone" came up in October of my junior year it was the first time I'd ever seen the Van Gogh and I couldn't believe what I saw. It was my scene, looking over Cross Lake and the I-220 bridge. Even though Van Gogh was Dutch, "Starry Night over the Rhone" was a French location and I was hooked. I really got into French and amazed everybody, including myself, that I could make an A in something.

I soaked up everything I could about Van Gogh, too. Found out he might have been manic-depressive, like my mom. Or maybe just depressed, like me. The French club took a field trip to a Dallas museum for an exhibition of the impressionists and I got to see a couple of his lesser-known works, some portraits. In the museum gift shop there were postcards and posters of all the Starry Night paintings. I decided to skip supper at the restaurant on the way home so I could spend \$14.95 for a poster of "Starry Night over the Rhone" – a big commitment for a sixteen-year-old boy, even a nerd. I put it up in my room, but I never told Dad why I liked it so much. I don't think he ever saw in it what I did.

About a year ago, when Dad had his heart attack, I came out to the camp after leaving the hospital because I really needed to get quiet on the inside. The doctors were already telling me it was a bad one and that Dad might not make it. It was a lot for a college kid with no close relatives and no real friends. I had taken Katie out a few times, but I didn't think she wanted to know about my family problems. Jimmy was the only one I might have talked to and he was out of town for his grandparents' anniversary. That night was the first time I got lost at the lake – that's what I called it.

Maybe I was disoriented, from worry or fatigue, but I know this acre of land like I know my bedroom. You pull off the parish road onto a little patch of gravel Zach and Dad spread themselves. Then you take a path worn down by our tramping through a stand of live oaks and pines and brush of various kinds. After 20, maybe 30 yards, you come out in a clearing next to the water and there's a little picnic shelter we built and the old dock where we keep a boat tied up. For a few years we had a storage shed on the property but kids or vagrants started breaking in and taking stuff. Somebody even camped there for a while one winter. We finally tore it down. Anyway, there's only one way in or out from the road, but I got lost on my way back to the car that night.

I checked my watch, so I remember it was about 11:00. When I came through the trees, my car was gone. I couldn't believe it. I didn't need that on top of having my dad maybe dying

in the hospital and mid-terms coming up. I tromped on up to the parish road, or where it should have been, but there was just a dirt track. It was obviously worn down by a lot of traffic, but there was no sign of any paving. It freaked me out. I couldn't figure out how I could have gotten lost on my way from the lakeshore to the road, in a spot I knew as well as any place on earth.

I stood there staring up and down the dirt road for a few minutes, trying to think what I was going to do next. My cell phone doesn't get good coverage at the lake and I doubted I could get a signal, even if I had someone to call. While I was standing by the road, I heard noises like from the sound track of an old Western, a creaky wagon being pulled by a horse. I stepped back and tried to blend in with the shadow of a pine tree.

I saw the light swaying first. When the wagon came into view, I could see the driver had a lantern hanging from a pole sticking up in the front corner of the wagon. He was talking to his horse a little, not too loud, and then he started singing, in French. I could make out a few words, but I didn't know the tune. Now, this is Louisiana, but not south Louisiana, and there aren't a bunch of people here who go around speaking French, even though we like to pretend we're all Cajun when we talk to people from Texas.

I waited until the wagon passed, then I turned to go back through the trees to the water. I don't know why. I guess it seemed like a safe

thing, to go back to a familiar place, while I decided what to do.

From the picnic shelter I stared up at the path to the road and satisfied myself there really was only one way out. So I headed back to the gravel clearing again, and my car was parked right where I'd left it. I alternated between thinking Thank God I'm not crazy after all! and I must be going crazy, like Mom!

I drove home and slept like a rock. It was after Christmas before I had time to come back out to the lake. Dad got better for a while. I finished up the semester okay and started thinking about what I would do after graduation. Jimmy was planning to go to Ole Miss for a Master's in engineering. Katie was talking about a music school up north somewhere. I had a feeling she was fishing for me, or somebody, to ask her not to go, but I didn't have anything to offer her. There's not a whole lot you can do with a liberal arts degree, lots of French and history and no teaching certificate. I really don't want to teach.

Dad and I watched some bowl game the day after Christmas. He couldn't even stay awake through the third quarter. He was losing strength every day. When he got in bed about eight, I said I was going to see what Jimmy was doing, but came out here to the lake by myself instead. I wasn't feeling much like being with other people. It was one of the good nights - no moon, no clouds, and not too cold yet. We don't get much real winter in Shreveport. The stars were big as I've ever seen them, kind of flaring

out, and there was a breeze that rippled the long reflections of city lights on the water, just like in the painting. I sat on the picnic table and stared out at the water for a long time. No expectations, no decisions to make – that’s what I like about being here.

While I was staring, a sailboat came up to our dock. That’s not too unusual. The yacht club is on the south side of the lake and lots of people like to sail Cross Lake at night. It’s safe –no sand bars, no odd trees out in the middle. It was unusual that this boat wasn’t carrying a light of any kind. Sort of appeared out of nowhere. A guy hopped out and tied up next to our little boat. Then things got weird. He helped a woman out of the boat and they started walking up the dock toward where I was. The woman was wearing a long, Victorian-era dress with a shawl. She had a hat tied on with a ribbon. I thought maybe they had been to some kind of costume party at the yacht club, but I couldn’t figure out why they tied up at our place. The couple walked past me and made for the path to the road without acknowledging me. I heard them talking softly to each other in French.

Then I got it: the painting has a man and a woman and a couple of small sailboats in the foreground. I never paid much attention to that. The figures are very dark and they weren’t part of my scene, my ‘starry nights’ – until then. I turned and watched the man and woman walk through the opening in the trees, then looked back at their boat bobbing at the end of our dock. I remember wondering if I should feel

afraid, but I hadn't been feeling much of anything for quite a while. They didn't look like ghosts and there wasn't anything creepy about the pair anyway. I followed them up the path to the gravel clearing.

When I got there, my car was gone again, and so were the people I had followed. I remembered the wagon I had seen before, and wondered where the driver had come from and where he might have been going. I turned right onto the dirt road, the direction the wagon had traveled, and started walking. I had a vague idea that I'd find someone to talk to and figure out what was going on.

The wind came up a little bit and I turned up the collar of my coat, but it still wasn't too cold. It seemed like I walked a half-mile or so before I saw some low-roofed stone buildings. A few had light in the windows, but nothing that looked like electricity. It was definitely not the neon-lit bait store I'm used to seeing along there. That's when I thought, What the heck am I doing? and turned back, almost running toward the fish camp. My car was in the gravel clearing. I jumped in and drove home shaking.

I didn't come to the lake again for a couple of months after that. Tried not to think about what had happened those two nights that I "got lost." By March, Katie was going out with a guy from the music department and Jimmy had found the love of his life in a coffee shop near campus. Dad was in the last stages of heart failure. We were both just hoping he could hold on until graduation. I realized I would be losing my

father and my school routine at about the same time.

I tried to stay busy during spring break working on a paper for my European history seminar, but I couldn't stay at the computer forever. I came out to the lake that Thursday night. On the way here, I started thinking about whether or not I wanted to "get lost" again. I thought about whether I had just wiggled out those two times or Or, what? I couldn't articulate what the alternative might be. And anyway, losing my mind was a more likely scenario, given my family history and my current stress. That night I fell asleep on the picnic table and didn't go back to my car until just before dawn; I didn't "get lost."

Jimmy got married after graduation and took his new wife along for grad school at Ole Miss. I don't know what happened to Katie. I got invited to work as a graduate assistant in the history department and it seemed like as good a plan as any. Dad didn't die until July, but he wasn't able to make it to the graduation ceremony.

After that, I started coming out to the lake about once a week. I've never seen the couple with the sailboat again, but when the night is just right, my car will be gone when I first go up the path to the road. Usually, I just go back down to the picnic table and start over again and everything's straight. A couple of times I walked up the dirt road to the village again. Once, I moved in close to one of the little houses and listened to the people inside talking in French. Last night I heard the wagon on the road again.

I've pretty well decided that, come next starry night, I'm going to flag down that wagon driver and go for a ride.

Time for a Change

The wind ruffled her hair. Patricia thought it was a breeze from an oscillating fan in the corner of the workout room, but then she heard the sweet, robust call of a Carolina wren. What had been a stationary bicycle in the women's fitness center was whizzing down Highway 171 under Patricia's pedal power. She rode past WalMart and the mobile home sales lot, too shocked to feel frightened by the amazing occurrence. The breeze was just enough to keep her from sweating and the light was glowing on the spring shades of green beside the road. She almost reached the Keithville post office before she decided she'd better figure out how to return. With an instinctive, quick back-pedal motion she was in the workout space at Feminine Form again, pumping her stationary bike like a Tour de France cyclist.

Patricia usually tried to arrive for her workout about ten in the morning. The early group would be gone, or going, and the lunch break patrons wouldn't be in yet. She liked it that way. Patricia wasn't antisocial, exactly. If there were other women working out who wanted to talk, she could chit-chat, make polite noises and smile at appropriate times. She was careful to greet the attendant and other customers when she arrived and to say goodbye when she left. She made a

point of playing the weekly games to earn "bonus bucks" and generally fit in as much as she could without really getting to know anyone.

Patricia expected other women probably commented about how quiet and focused she was, if anyone else happened to be in the workout room when she left. The idea of herself "focused" on exercise was funny to Patricia. She hated it. She'd been working out in some format or other for the last five years, but never learned to like it. Never had any "burst of energy" or "felt better" because of it. She did it because she was almost sixty and knew she needed some sort of regular physical activity to maintain strength and flexibility, especially now that she was retired and not walking around a classroom all day. Patricia knew she was a little overweight but had no interest in dieting. The only thing she liked about exercise was feeling proud of herself for doing it regularly when she hated it so much. She'd rather sit with a book and a cup of coffee.

Instead, Patricia drove five minutes to Feminine Form three times a week and made the rounds of the various exercise machines and the springy dance boards spaced in between them for aerobic activity. She was well aware that regular walking of the half-mile distance, instead of driving, would be a no-cost activity and probably yield at least as good returns in physical fitness as the time she spent at Feminine Form. But the bank-drafted membership was part of what pulled her up off the couch to exercise, so it was worth it. And she often combined trips to Feminine Form with

shopping or recycling, taking clothes to the cleaners or getting a haircut, so there wasn't much additional fuel cost.

It was a particularly beautiful late-April Wednesday in Shreveport when Patricia began her cycling adventures. The sky was Wedgwood blue with only a few cameo clouds. The azaleas were spent but oaks and maples had leafed out to join the evergreen pines and magnolias. Even drastically pruned crape myrtles were bushing out with greenery. Patricia drove to Feminine Form with windows down to enjoy the morning air.

Only Marlena was in the workout room, hula-hooping for her cool-down activity and gossiping with Bonnie, the attendant. She was gone before Patricia finished a quarter of her first rotation on the machines. Some women liked the attendant to stand around and chat while they exercised if there was no one else to talk to, but Bonnie had figured out Patricia didn't really care for that. She was glad to be able to finish some paperwork, make a few phone calls and play computer solitaire while Patricia worked her way around the circle of machines, moving from the leg press to the rower to the bicep/tricep apparatus, and so on, whenever the perky recorded voice called through the music, "It's time for a change!"

Another thing Patricia liked about arriving when no one else was working out was avoiding the awkwardness of crowding up on another woman if she decided to skip a certain machine on the circuit, or of someone else crowding up

on her if she wanted to take longer at a particular station. The stationary bike was one she liked to linger on. Sometimes she closed her eyes and pedaled through several rounds of the voice announcing, "It's time for a change."

And so, that beautiful April morning, Patricia cycled right out of Feminine Form and south on Highway 171 on the heretofore-stationary bike. When she reversed pedaling and found herself back in the workout room, Patricia felt as if she had just awakened from a vivid dream, that slightly disoriented state when you try to act as if you haven't been asleep at all, as if you are quite alert, thank you, to anyone who might be watching. But no one was watching. Bonnie was on the phone with a prospective client and didn't even glance at Patricia.

"It's time for a change," the voice announced, and for once Patricia agreed. She moved from the stationary bike to the cushioned dance pad to her left and started doing jumping jacks. She wondered how many "times for a change" she had pedaled through while tripping down Highway 171. Patricia tried to remember when she had first arrived and was surprised to discover she'd only been on the premises fifteen minutes. She managed to complete two more circuits of the workout equipment, but skipped the stationary bike when she came to it, both times.

On the way home, Patricia concentrated on what she would make for Jonathan's supper and how many loads of laundry she still needed to do that afternoon. She didn't have any frame of

reference for thinking about what had happened to her that morning, except maybe the biblical story of Philip, who went running on an errand and then was suddenly at his destination. But she hadn't been planning to go south on Highway 171, and couldn't imagine why she would have suddenly been tooling along there on a bicycle, never mind how she could have been traveling on a stationary bike. It was safer to treat it as a daydream.

Friday, Patricia didn't go to Feminine Form. She wasn't avoiding the location, just marshaling her energy for mowing the lawn and pruning some shrubbery. Yard work was plenty of exercise. The following Monday, she returned to her routine and arrived at Feminine Form at 10:10. Once again, by the time she was half-way through her first circuit, she was the only customer.

When Patricia came to the stationary bike, she blew out a sharp breath, as if steeling herself for a difficult task, and hopped on. She pedaled slowly at first, then picked up speed. She didn't close her eyes for a bit, but after the cheerful voice assured her, "It's time for a change," two times, she began to relax against the back support and closed her eyes.

Almost immediately, Patricia noticed a change in the quality of light through her eyelids. Honeysuckle scented the air and the wind rushed past. She pedaled on. When she opened her eyes, she was once again traveling south on Highway 171. What was it about that

road? She didn't even know anyone who lived out that way.

Patricia kept traveling past the point where she had turned back on her first trip out. Spring is a sublime season in northwest Louisiana and she decided just to enjoy the day. Since the situation was quite surreal, Patricia didn't concern herself with other traffic and was frankly not paying much attention when she approached the blinking light near Mansfield School. She noted afterward that the scene really did unfold in slow motion, as she had heard accident victims say. She felt as if she were watching it all from outside herself, perhaps from the top of the hill that descends toward the traffic light when approaching from the north. The school was on the southeast corner of the intersection and a convenience store on the southwest.

A young mother, carrying one child on her hip and holding the hand of a preschooler, was about to cross the highway from KwikMart to the school. They stood a few yards south of the actual intersection. An eighteen wheeler whizzed past the pedestrians, never slowing for the blinking yellow light. The mother then started across the four-lane highway, hitching the baby up on her hip and pulling the reluctant older child along. Because of the truck, she had not seen the SUV that pulled up from the east and that driver had not seen her. He was intent on entering the highway as quickly as possible and barely paused for his blinking red light and the passing truck.

Patricia approached the intersection faster than she could have pedaled on a regular bike. As the SUV turned south, already picking up speed, Patricia was also entering the intersection. The driver jerked his steering wheel hard left and ran onto the median, brakes screeching. Patricia was pretty sure he was cursing her and her bicycle as well. The pedestrians froze for a moment in the middle of the far right lane while the near collision played out in front of them. The mother pushed her preschooler back to the gravel shoulder and collapsed with him and the baby on the ground. They screamed and shook, with dry eyes and twisted mouths of belated fear.

Patricia wondered later why she didn't start braking sooner, in reflexive self-protection, but she understood that her role had been to deflect the SUV from its trajectory of collision with the family crossing the highway. And, when she finally did reverse motion, she was instantly removed from the scene and back in the workout room at Feminine Form, pedaling backward with such urgency her legs ached.

This time, Bonnie noticed Patricia's wide eyes and asked, "Are you okay? Have you been checking your pulse rate?"

Patricia tried to smile. "It's time for a change," she whispered. "I think I'd better not do three circuits today."

This time, Patricia could not dismiss her cycling adventure as a daydream. It had been too intense. She replayed the incident in her mind throughout the afternoon. She couldn't

make sense of it, but she tried to decide what to do next. Should she avoid the stationary bike whenever she visited Feminine Form? Were any of the other machines likely to start behaving strangely? She scanned the classified section of *The Times* to see if anyone had a three wheeled bike for sale – one with big, fat tires and a deep basket. Maybe she should just ride through the neighborhood for exercise.

Both options seemed safe but somehow unsatisfying to Patricia. She could scarcely admit to herself that a part of her, just a small part, thought it might be fun to see where the erstwhile-stationary bike might take her next time. Did the bike only travel down Highway 171? Would it always encounter the same near-accident? Or was this her chance to be a superhero, arriving in the nick of time at scenes around the area, preventing various tragedies? The thought intrigued Patricia enough that she spent some time imagining news stories that would ensue, and made serious plans to upgrade her workout clothing.

Patricia didn't think there would be photographs of her in the media. It had seemed very clear that her presence on Highway 171 was needed only for the seconds necessary to divert the SUV from its original course. But she thought it would be a good idea to look her best while she was out and about, so people at the scene would have something stylish, and memorable, to describe in interviews when they recalled the mysterious woman on a bicycle who

appeared out of nowhere and just as quickly disappeared.

When Patricia was finally able to leave this line of fantasy, another thought occurred to her. What about the first time, when she back-pedaled out of the scene before anything happened? Had there been an accident that day, that she was supposed to avert but didn't because she abandoned a cosmic assignment? If she didn't return to Feminine Form and her adventures on the stationary bike, would people die that she was supposed to save? Patricia's breathing quickened. She whispered I didn't sign up for this.

Patricia didn't sleep well Monday night. Jonathan had a difficult project going on at work and she didn't bother him with the strange story of her trip down Highway 171. She puttered in the yard on Tuesday. In the afternoon, she called her son Mitchell on the pretext of needing help programming the digital video recorder. She thought she might be able to talk to him about the cycling incident, but she could tell from his voice he was preoccupied with something at work, too, so she didn't pursue the topic. She went to bed early Tuesday night and slept better than she expected to.

By Wednesday morning, Patricia had decided to return to Feminine Form, work the circuit fearlessly and take whatever adventure the stationary bike might offer. She felt her hero complex had abated but she took care with her hair and even put on a little mascara. She chose

a new pink tee shirt to wear with her old workout pants.

Bonnie noticed the new shirt immediately and remarked how well it complimented Patricia's coloring. They began a conversation about hair and makeup that lasted longer than their usual pleasantries. Patricia worked her way through an entire circuit, including the stationary bike, while talking with Bonnie. A client Patricia hadn't met before came in half-way through that first round and they included her in the discussion, which had progressed to some skin-care issues that were not strictly cosmetic. Bonnie had some scarring on her legs related to an old auto accident and Patricia promised to bring her some information about a product which could minimize scar tissue. The remainder of her workout, Patricia spent in getting-to-know-you conversation with the new client. There was no time to close her eyes during turns on the bike.

Friday, Patricia brought the pamphlet on Scarase to Feminine Form. Bonnie thanked her but was working on end-of-the-month reports and not as inclined to chat as on Wednesday. Three other women Patricia knew slightly were working out and discussing family trips to Disney World, but all finished their workouts and left before Patricia reached the stationary bike for the third time in her routine.

The music accompanying the insistent calls of "It's time for a change" that day was odd arrangements of classic rock songs, not Patricia's favorite track. If only they had some classical, instrumental tracks, she thought, so