

## My Montana Story

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My Montana story is much like the land itself, large and expansive, warm at times and brutally cold at others; the different aspects of the land reflect the different aspects of my personality, my nature, my soul. This particular morning, I have chosen to hike through the quiet forests near my home. As I slowly make my way through the trees I find myself in awe: towering beings, standing like sentinels guarding the earth from all that intend to do it harm. I stand and listen to a babbling brook, I watch the water reflect the beams of light floating serenely through the trees. I gingerly step over the creek and continue up the mountain, I slowly make my way around and over boulders, tightrope walk downed timber and eventually make it to the top. For a moment I stand upon the rocky summit of this small mountain; I feel the warm breeze blow through my hair, I take in a deep breath and am overwhelmed by the sweet smell of pine. I sit down upon a small rock and gaze out over the Helena valley below me. As I stare at the golden fields and the ominous mountains rising fiercely in the distance, my mind begins to wander. I think about my life in this great state that we call home; I think of the good times and the bad, the places I've been and the people I've met, most importantly I think about what this means to me.

In the distance I can see the road leading to Hauser lake. I'm immediately taken back to a warm summer day a long time ago. I can clearly remember standing on the cliffs warily gazing at the water far below me, with a deep breath and a howl I leaped forth into the unknown. For a split second, as I sailed through the air speeding violently towards the water, I felt completely at peace. As the world rushed towards me, I heard the roar of the wind, felt the pumping of adrenaline through my veins and finally, the shock as I plunged deep into the lake's cold, dark waters.

I slowly turn my gaze towards downtown Helena and I'm marching in the Vigilante Day Parade. I hear the crescendo of the band, the indiscernible screams of the onlookers and feel the sweat trickle down my back. We march perfectly in time, the sun shooting beams of light off my trumpet as I blast out *Smoke on the Water*.

As I follow the parade path with my eyes I find myself staring at Vigilante Stadium. I recall a Friday night; the stadium lights piercing the darkness of the twilight and setting the field and its players alight. Having suffered a season ending ACL injury, I have been relegated to the sideline for the entire season, but none the less I'm still doused in sweat. The entire night I've been running up and down the sideline like a banshee, yelling support to my teammates and vile threats at our opponents. With several seconds left in the game, and our opponents driving towards our end zone, the quarterback and myself rush towards the student section and begin to rally them, we call to them to scream like they've never screamed before, and they greet this request with a deafening roar. As the final seconds tick off the clock, we rush the field: the sense of euphoria has swept throughout the stadium like a lightning strike. We leap into the air to high five each other, scream into the night and shake each other's hands as we walk off the field with giant grins on our faces.

A hawk sails high over my head and flies east, I track it with my eyes until I'm staring at East Helena. I recall a warm September night, I'm sitting at the head of our kitchen table as my family sings me happy birthday. We are celebrating my 8th year of existence, my first in Montana. I remember averting my eyes from my family, my face red from embarrassment but a big toothy grin spread across my lips. I see my mother kneeling next to me, my grandmother sitting on the other side of my me, and my sister giggling at the far end of the table as my father gave her a silly dad grin. I remember the sweet smell of the cake and the warmth of the candles

that flickered in front of me. I can still see the presents, sparkling with the light of the candles: I remember the sweet song of the Meadowlarks and the distant bark of dogs. I recall glancing out into the early twilight hours and feeling so happy and excited, so loved, so protected.

A cloud passes over the sun and slowly drains the warmth from the air, as I stare at the now dark valley before my thoughts begin to drift into a darker direction. I turn my attention to the cars traveling down Montana Avenue in the distance and I'm taken back to a cold December night. I'm driving recklessly through the night, my girlfriend at the time riding shotgun while a good friend of ours leans forwards between the seats as to not be left out of the immediate conversation. Me and my passenger are howling in laughter - I had just speedily hit a curb and for half a moment the car had careened through the air before lurching back down to the ground - while my girlfriend stared at me with a concerned look in her eyes but the trace of a smirk on her lips. We race into a Dairy Queen and quickly order, by the time we leave were all laughing again due to my bumbling performance at ordering for the three of us. As we tear back up the street, we all begin rapping and dancing along to the song *Black Beatles* as the first snowflakes of a winter storm begin to smack into my windshield.

As my eyes follow that snaking road north, I find myself looking at Capital High School and then at a modern style church. I'm now sitting in this church, tears streaming down my face as a soulful rendition of *Amazing Grace* fills the packed room. I grieve the loss of one of my best friends, a girl who I told everything to and considered close as kin. Just a few months prior this girl had been laughing in the back of my car as we roared down Montana Ave. with ice cream in our hands and *Black Beatles* blaring over the radio. A great sadness has consumed me as I do everything in my power to hold back the tears and control my emotions, but I simply cannot. Later that night as I sit in the shower, the warm water running down my back I let out my grief. I

pound the floor of the shower until my knuckles bleed. I scream and shout, I throw my head back and yell at God until I'm completely hoarse, and then I cry like a baby, my quiet sobs drowned out by the constant percussion of the water. I glance down at my knuckles, they no longer bear the cuts and bruises from that night, but the emotional scar still remains fresh in my mind.

I find myself getting lost in thought as I sit upon my rock on the top of this hill. Taking a deep breath, I glance up just in time to see the sun reappear and breathe life back into the valley. The world has begun to awaken, the birds are chirping, more cars roar down the distant highways, a plane takes off into the warm morning sky, and a train blows its horn as it heads west. I slowly rise and look over this magnificent land. I watch the golden fields glow in the early afternoon light and fluffy white clouds cast long shadows across the valley as they race through the sky towards an unknown destination. Once again this land takes my breath away, and reminds me how much it has come to represent my life. As I turn and begin to make my way home, I think about how my Montana story is much like the land itself, large and expansive, warm at times and brutally cold at others; the different aspects of the land reflect the different aspects of my personality, my nature, and my soul.