



Not in Wyoming Anymore

Shelly Catterson

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Over and over, Bart sits in homes and funeral homes, a handful of his father's ashes in one pocket and Trevor's turquoise ring from the Wind Rivers in the other. He is a man who does not believe in God's mysterious ways. He believes only in death, and in living. And

Wyoming. Even now, as he sits on a limp motel bed, under a dusty painting of Devil's Tower, he believes in his home state, in his memories.

He delivers the ashes of loved ones, a job he inherited from his father. As he yanks on his boots, he wonders who will deliver him when he dies. And yet he feels grateful to rest between destinations, closer to his mountains and away from swamps. He almost feels hope, even though he cried into his coffee with a grieving mother in Casper yesterday, her young daughter dead, far from home, having fallen into a mess of water moccasins while water-skiing. A teenager who drowned in her own life jacket. He drove with her ashes for long miles under late summer sun, then watched her mother's aging face, full of ruptured blood vessels after screaming at a lake from three states away. He brought her daughter back to the dry open plains.

Bart's own windswept mother died when he was twelve, her body buried along the Absaroka Range. Her grave illegal, deep in the wilderness. But his father, also born here, asked to be cremated. He chose not to ask his only son to make that mountain trip again, to find a horse to carry his father's body and a shovel. A trip Bart still hopes to make on foot one day, to spread his father's ashes next to his mother. But he never wanted to hike in by himself, without even a dog for company.

Despite all his travel, his father's heart gave out in his own bed, three years back, in 1997. That year, a blur of ashes, seething loneliness and little else Bart can remember.

He cannot seem to remember this motel's new name, something about sage or sagebrush, but he remembers when he and Trevor stayed here soon after they met in college. How Bart wanted to hide under wool blankets and not leave their room.

Now as he stumbles toward the local cafe, he cannot stop himself. He digs the black and white photo out of his glove box for the fourth time this week. The edges curl up, holding the dark center, protecting only memories. For now. Eventually his photo will wear thin, will rip, turn up lost, or on a table at a funeral home.

But if he takes the photo to enough meals with him, maybe Trevor will live. Bart blames himself for Trevor's virus, for not protecting Trevor somehow. Bart knows no logic, only shame and hope. A backward prayer to the high desert. Wind tries to rip the prayer from his naked hand as he crosses the road, gravel pelting his legs.

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Once inside, Bart recognizes the looks, sideways glances from locals as they assess a stranger, and the brief quiet, as if the open door suctioned up all the talk. How the waitress pauses as she pours his coffee, impressed or amused with his clean and somewhat fashionable clothes. She only surprises him when she calls him "Big Fella," which may be a first. She is not, but he calls her "Li'l Lady" right back, which makes her eyebrows float. Bart watches her study his photo on the counter.

He tries to savvy the image from her perspective: 20 years ago, Bart and Trevor, arm in arm on the edge of the Wind River, the distant mountains, and their two male rescued greyhounds, Butch and Romeo, taking center stage. Romeo humps Butch, but from the front, crotch to muzzle. They were not your typical ranch dogs.

Now working back in Wyoming, somewhere Bart feels almost too at home, something about those fragile trusting dogs, their bones against skin, surges terror through his stomach and to the back of his skull. The very landscape betrays him, the crazy wind stripping him raw.

When he smells cigarette smoke, he imagines a local holding a flame to his shirt, but he faces forward. He flinches, very awake, sensing catsup in his hair like blood. But this is not 1961, let alone a counter at Woolworth's in Nashville during the Civil Rights Movement. He is not his father forty years ago, a man who involved himself in several sit-ins down South, though his father was white, and from the North. Bart was never arrested or beaten into an ugly heap by strangers. He was never accused of betraying his people, except by Trevor. Instead, Bart always knew the people who fought him, who spilled his blood, and he learned to protect himself.

For a brief moment, he leans back against his white privilege in his home where white privilege could almost protect him, and he studies the blue eye-shadow on his waitress. Maybe she knew his father from all his travels in this area. Except now, she frowns at him, confused.

Also white and privileged, Matthew Shepard absorbed his last horizon less than one hundred miles from here, and less than two years ago. A gay man, crucified on a fence post, tied with barbed wire. Bart stops drinking his coffee. He swallows. He chokes on his sloppy memories and falls back on what he learned: words. Sometimes the lies save him.

"My brother," he lies to his waitress, nametag Glenda. "We used to hunt around here." As he speaks, he imagines Trevor's bones straining against skin, his body trying to live, or at least run away like a wounded greyhound. But out in Seattle, Trevor can barely walk, let alone run. He calls Bart often, but Bart is on the road more than home. Bart dies a little more himself with each strained phone call.

Trevor would never lie about being gay, even in Wyoming.

Glenda only nods, watches Bart tuck the photo into his shirt pocket, against his chest. The shade of her eyes, piercing right through him. Four words: Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

Bart catches his reflection in the dessert case, his feeble smile as Glenda delivers his breakfast. He sees the same hollow effort he gave for his passport photo and the forms he never sent. Ten years ago, he let Trevor join the Peace Corps alone, let Trevor believe they both needed separate adventures, even knowing how reckless Trevor was on his own. How Trevor buried his pain with risk.

And Bart, he never admitted his fear of bugs. Or insects, as Trevor called them.

Instead, he bravely took Trevor to the airport, hugged his lover off the concrete floor and then alone, wept so hard, he could not leave the parking garage for hours. He let creatures with too many legs take Trevor to Africa and return him three years later, with AIDS. Trevor then needed to move to a city, and he chose his own home, two states away.

But at least before Trevor's time in Africa, Bart sounded less afraid. Only afterward, when Bart's shame kept him from following Trevor to Seattle, did his weakness beat him down, and reveal the coward he was.

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"Quite the van you have there," Glenda says when she returns with warm maple syrup. She just lifts her chin, though one hand is free. Bart turns his head slowly, grateful she resisted pointing. Right in front of his motel room sits his father's old Chevy van. And right behind Bart sit the hunters and ranchers. No eyes look up at him. The locals only eat and talk.

"My inheritance," he says. Glenda leans down to hear him. But before she asks, Bart tells her, his mouth half full of blueberry pancake, "I deliver ashes."

She sets her coffee pot on the counter.

"You know, people. After they die." He waits for the reaction, as usual. As if his photo was not enough. As if he will seem more acceptable as a workingman. He continues, "Not everyone can deal with planes, or all the details of bringing ashes home. So I deal instead."

"That's weird," she says.

"I know," Bart nods.

"But respectful."

"And it's orange on the inside." He pauses for effect, as if he needs more. "Blue and orange, you know, complimentary colors in the art world." They both know she will not glimpse the deepest insides of his van, at least not where he sleeps at night, when a real bed eludes him.

"Orange," she says. "Of course."

When Glenda walks away, Bart eats his hashbrowns without tasting anything. He wants to know what Trevor can eat now, maybe only liquids. He imagines Trevor's stomach under washboard muscle and skin where Bart used to rest his head at night, where he could somehow hear Trevor's heart.

He asks for more coffee, but not for a pay phone. Every day since talking to Trevor's mother last week, Bart needs a phone but lacks the courage to ask or look. Trevor's mother still talks to him like a son, as if he is more than an orphan. But like Trevor, who always forgave Bart easily for his secrecy, for his deep-rooted dry prairie silence, she too is far away. A mother blind to how isolated Bart is, her only son dying.

Without Trevor, Bart will always be alone. Trevor is the only man who can draw Bart out of his roots, as he did back in their college dorms, from their first night meeting. Long after their roommates went to bed, they kept talking over a deck of cards with the faces of poets instead

of royalty. They understood each other as the sun and the moon must understand each other. Deep contrast and the pull of a fierce natural orbit.

Trevor had wanted out of the Seattle gloom, so he left home for Laramie. He told his mother he wanted to join rodeos, wear pearl snap shirts. Then he found reality and Bart, raised on a ranch until his father had to sell when Bart was fifteen. Until his father took a job in grief.

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His ribs ache and his elbows rest hard against the counter and Bart would give Glenda anything, even his father's van and most of his ashes, just to hear his father's question again. He would give Trevor's turquoise ring to know if his father understood *No Matter What*, to understand blood family conviction, in light of Bart's trainwreck life and his lack of choice in loving only men.

He remembers when his father stayed up late with him the night before Bart first registered for the Draft, when his father shared his bourbon and brutal stories from Vietnam, the one time Bart heard those stories, when the sun still rose and they were still awake and together, still alive but not alone, and his father finally asked, after the first long quiet, his hands loose in his lap, "You love men, don't you?"

Bart was 18, still a virgin, but his father knew anyway. And yet Bart made the choice then, as if his father was not a brave man who wanted the truth. He believed in protecting his father, who had survived so much pain. But he only gave himself a lifetime of regret with one word, a less than original lie. Two letters: *No*.

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This is the same word Bart now says to himself. He says "No," out loud and to no one. He cannot bear Trevor dying on him too. He watches Glenda's back as the ranchers watch his. "Not Trevor," he says, louder, and to ghosts. Glenda turns to watch him, curious.

Bart will keep talking until someone truly listens. He spins around, away from the counter, a man facing those other faces. At the same time, he draws Trevor's ring from his pocket and slips the silver back onto his left hand.

And right before Glenda walks out from behind the counter and wraps one arm around him, covering him like a blanket, Bart says to himself: "Not yet." Bart has to see Trevor again, before he dies.

As she leads him outside, into the shadow and the light of the pay phone, he feels Glenda grow concerned. A hungry ranch dog tracks all his movements from the back of a flatbed truck. He hears Glenda's voice, or his dead mother's, in the silence, saying *I'm right here*. But Glenda and the dog will not be the only ones to focus on him. The ghosts will watch him too.

Shelly Catterson was born and raised in the Rocky Mountains. She works hard to dance, learn Spanish, and earn insights from getting lost. Art, travel and wilderness help her survive anything. Her stories have been printed by Wolverine Farm Publishing and performed by Stories on Stage. The Normal School accepted a story of hers for an issue in 2018.



