

Z and Q

by Krista Madsen

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ART BY PYOTR JANECEK, MADMAN

MUSIC BY GOODMAN CARTER

READ BY KRISTA MADSEN



They pitch the only tent in a lakeside campground where everyone else is ensconced in metal. At the self-check-in station – a slot box, some envelopes – the bulletin board admonishes them to keep a clean site, stow their food in lockers, make noise.

Early July and the sun never quite sets or rises, only teasing the horizon before middling the mountains. Never tired, never awake, they absorb, understanding each other without words. It would take some effort to speak, let alone make noise. Firebuilding lacks thrill with no darkness to contrast it, but they have cans of noodle soup to heat. Their faces match the sky, pre-gloaming gray, 1 a.m. Even the wildflowers she picked – prickly rose, arctic lupine, wild iris – look lackluster in their water bottle on the picnic table. She couldn't find the kind she most desired, the rare and putrid chocolate lily; he, the one with the sense of smell, was relieved. They have their glacier cruise early in the morning. They anticipate the turquoise ice, the inner groaning of this endangered thing, but they must finish this game. Only dumb, six-point words. He is clearly nesting on the blood letters, the Z, Q. Letters that poison if left unused.

He loses at last. They unzip the flap.

The inflatable pillow flattens in her half-sleep and she turns and turns, wishing their mummy sacks weren't too odd-shaped to conjoin.

They are separate. The night long. Every rustle a bear. Then the tent brightens, and his face lightens, punched through with dark spots where the night hair has grown. Yet now he is a little boy in his sack, inviting her in. Can we both fit in this? They giggle. They struggle with their extra layers of smoked clothes to reveal bits of skin sticky with bug spray. He tastes her bitter neck and stops. Off go the bottoms, they don't bother with the tops or socks. He pokes his finger around a bit, more to survey the landscape down there than to please her, and then his penis enters and the roughness of his face – so white and the night hair so dark – makes him ugly suddenly, not like the old man she sees the potential of sometimes in him, but like he's been squeezed through a small hole; she wonders if he sees her ugliness now too. Can she fool him? Her useless breasts when she's on her back flatten into nothing making her imagine they are two Cub Scouts here in the clearing, worried and titillated by the threat that their animal might find them, the bear finally emerging, lured by their macaroni flesh, their salt sweat, their opening of cans.

She screams.

ABOUT KRISTA MADSEN

Krista Madsen is the author of two novels (Degas Must Have Loved a Dancer & Four Corners, both out by Livingston Press), the sole proprietor of the Brooklyn wine/arts lounge Stain, and a writing instructor at both the Gotham Writers' Workshop and NYU. www.stainbar.com!