

Fort Stark, New Hampshire

by J.M. Whalen

-Boy on a Hill-

Noah stood overlooking a 19th-century naval base that had never been used in battle. The highest structure, fenced and signed, was as white as the sky behind it. The stairs were grey, like the rocks by the water down below.

Closer to the center of the fort, the concrete matched the dead grass on the surrounding embankment, just darker than parchment. Scribbles of mortar clung to it like toddlers' graffiti in a nursery.

They reminded Noah of when he'd first moved into town, when his dad was excited and motivated and let Noah help mud the cracking walls of the family's 'new' home—the house had been settling into the soft coastal earth for nearly as long as Fort Stark had.

These days, Noah mudded the cracks alone, but he still did it with his fingers, like his dad had used to. Every time made him remember doing it as a child, solemnly, studying his father's sense of privilege.

He flexed his fingers and breathed through the loose knit of his mittens. They had not been warm enough to protect his knuckles on the moped-ride here. His 1972 Puch Maxi, which his cousin, Cam, had helped him airbrush cyan, was hidden behind a hill. Noah didn't hide it because he was doing something wrong, but because the cops were known for being 'bored' here. Plus, he took pride in muscling it up a hill and into the brush. He'd mostly fixed it up himself, so it was good to feel the small engine persevere against the incline.

He had a mind for devices. He wouldn't know his way around more than one cylinder, and even then, he was mostly just familiar with the one he had. But he'd taught himself how to repair it online, and he knew every component. He stretched a t-shirt out from under his coat and wiped the condensation from his glasses.

The geometry of the fort appealed to his need for control: the rectangular windows and their grimaces of upright bars; the circular cannon mounts and steam tunnels; the linear galvanized handrails, rusted at the joints and the end-caps, where the coating had been burned off by welding torches.

Fort Stark had been built for an unrealized contingency, yet it felt inevitable. And it's crumbling felt inevitable, too. The place simply existed.

That's how beauty was supposed to be, Noah considered: available to every one, only sensed by the perceptive. You didn't need money to know beauty. Cam said beauty was the first sense money dulled—before friendship, even. Noah's mind flitted about, but he remained calm. He breathed the cold air and felt deeply grateful for his life and whatever God had in mind for him. We all had roles.

He looked back toward the dirt parking area. His model hadn't arrived yet. Noah *had* gotten there earlier than was supposed to. His beige corduroy pants and black wool coat camouflaged with the wan brush and shadows, and he wondered if she'd easily see him. He took a step higher on the hill.

Raising the Nikon SLR that had taken him two years to afford, he adjusted his iso and aperture to accommodate the pale sky. He turned his gaze across the ocean to the Isle of Shoals, barely visible through the thick, wispy air. The coldness made his lungs feel raw and his teeth ache when he breathed, but he didn't mind it.

-December Rendezvous-

Noah scanned the water for whales or seals but saw none. They lived there, but mostly only fishermen saw them. Noah had seen two baby seals that past summer, but not how he would have wanted.

They'd been lying dead in dry sand at the beach, carcasses too twisted and sun-baked to know what kind of creature they were at first. It had made him feel sick to wrestle the first one from his lab, Matty.

He shuddered and turned back toward the parking lot. He was used to waiting. He and his girlfriend always met in secret.

She wasn't allowed to date yet, but soon her parents would give her the respect she deserved. She was in the top ten at their high school, she'd won 'most fashionable' two years in a row, and she was the lead costume designer for every stage production. Her parents took pictures at the show, sitting in reserved seats with perfect posture.

But they saw it as a hobby—a predictable one, even, as they owned a laundromat and dry cleaners'. In China, they'd been tailors. When their daughter applied to NYU's design school early decision, they even made her apply to the business school, too, just in case she changed her mind.

Noah respected her more than he respected himself. She gave him hope. Noah's cousin, Cam, said Chinese didn't like Blacks, but Noah didn't even bother wondering. Cam just liked trying to rile him up. Once she turned 18, she always said, her parents would loosen up about dating for sure.

At last, she arrived in her dad's 'midnight blue' Volkswagen, which he'd bought last year, gently used. Noah became aware of the way he was standing and tried to look natural as she got out of the car. She saw him and waved.

He was familiar with the clothes she wore, but the outfit was new. She'd put it together special for that day, at Noah's request, to help him with his portfolio for internships.

Persian blue, darted wool coat; grey hat; red lipstick; grey clutch; black leggings; grey ankle warmers; blue Roger Vivier flats that had taken her three birthdays to afford. She'd sewed the hat, knit the ankle warmers, and hemmed the thrift-store coat. Her hands were stubbornly bare, and her pointed fingernails were shined.

The snowflakes fattened in the air. More slight ones had been falling for a while, but Noah hadn't noticed them. He subconsciously associated the new, prettier ones with her arrival, and he wished the ground were cold enough to bear them. They melted almost immediately, except on the concrete fort.

Noah didn't own a telescopic lens, so he took a few practice shots of trees until she got closer. He switched his camera to black and

white to take advantage of the haze, and he motioned for her to meet him by the water.

He watched her step over the rocks along the shore and was filled with pride. He strained to remember the Chinese she'd recently taught him.

'Ni hao! Ni hen piao liang! Wo ai ni!' He said to himself. He could tell it sounded stupid, and he probably wouldn't say any of it to her. But it sounded less stupid every time.

-Dreaming by the Water-

After a kiss, they decided to take pictures right away. The cold was getting worse, and the snowflakes were falling in clumps.

The Shoals, a retreat of local artists, the home to Blackbeard's treasure, the crash site of Spanish frigates and German U-boats, was no longer visible through the flurry. Noah had hoped to use them as a background, but he settled for the spit of marsh across Newcastle harbor. Soon that was obscured, too, and he had to rely solely on the brutal fort itself.

Noah asked his model to pose extra still, and he lowered his shutter speed to let the snowflakes blur around her. She looked frail and uncertain against the stark concrete. Soon she looked not only frail, but persecuted, afraid.

"What will you do if taking pictures doesn't work out, Noah?" Her agitation was apparent, and Noah lowered his camera. They weren't quite face-to-face, and Noah wasn't sure if he should step forward to talk less awkwardly. He didn't.

"What? Of course it'll work out. When I was a kid, my dad grinded parts at the Shipyard with nothing but a GED, and look where he is now—grinding parts at the Shipyard, with nothing but a GED."

"But what if it doesn't work out doing this? You should have applied to college, Noah."

Noah felt his face get hot, and the snowflakes that melted on his cheekbones made it worse. What the fuck was she bringing that up now for? What the *fuck* did that have to do with anything right now?

"You know I can't afford college. And Jamie needs me."

"What Jamie needs is for his dad to come back home and accept his responsibility." Noah couldn't tell if she was crying or not. "You don't just get to do what you like doing and get famous for it, Noah."

Noah had pictures in the high school publication, the local online paper, and a couple of low-traffic blogs.

"That's exactly how it works, if you love it, and you're good at it, and you bust your ass for it. Cam gets it. He'll come get Jamie when he can, he just needs to get off the ground first." Noah didn't mean to defend him, but he couldn't help it. He could never help it. "He'll bring Jamie out to LA as soon as he can afford to. You have to make sacrifices to get where you want to be. I'll have to, too, some day. Why don't you get that?"

"I get that your cousin has a shit-apartment and two walk-ons. I totally get that. But he's not going anywhere, Noah, he's running away. I—"

Like he needed to hear what fucking TV shows his own cousin had been on. Noah could tell she didn't want to be angry any more than he did. She stepped forward and reached out to touch his shoulder, and he stepped backward, without meaning to.

"I committed to Stern," she said. Stern is NYU's business school. "Well, I got in this morning, and it's early commitment, so I'm going."

"Early commitment? How could you commit early to Tisch *and* Stern?"

"I never applied to Tisch, Noah. It would have been selfish. My parents did everything they could to get me here. I just don't want them to have to work so hard anymore..."

They looked at each other for a moment. Noah turned and sat down on the edge of the bunker. His model sat down next to him, took one of his hands in both of hers, and buried it in her lap. She leaned her head on his shoulder. Snow settled on their coats and hair and her hat. He let go of his camera to put his other hand in his pocket. The camera hung heavy on its neck strap.

Sometimes, the camera felt like a key to a better life. Others, a raft to keep him from having to tread water. Occasionally, all it felt

like was weight, a tool made for an unrealized contingency and kept around out of stubbornness.

It had to exist, and eventually it would have to go away, like everything. He knew it was a reach, he'd always known that. But wasn't a dream supposed to be a reach? Wasn't it good to reach? Was it?

