

“Kara’s Walk”

Each day begins with a walk. Heavy hearted and weighed down by her leaden feet, Kara walks 2.73 miles along the gravel road to school. She lives in a relatively remote area of Nebraska, in what she refers to as ‘the great median’. Not large enough for an urban layout with tightly packed schools. Nor large enough for paved roads, except for the 5 blocks referred to semi-sarcastically as “downtown”. It’s not very urban at all: just a Target, a Dairy Queen, and a HyVee, which sits adjacent to the equally rural batting cages- which are also ridden with ragweed. However, it is not small enough for a bus route. No school bus roams the roads, picking up the ‘country kids’ who live miles apart, on acreages with dilapidated farms, fields overcome with crops (some with corn, other just with weeds), many also housing horses well past their prime. Steeds with names like Thunder and Bolt who now munch hay silently as the families that live in the ranches watch the light go out from behind their eyes. And so, stuck cruelly in between the two extremes, just far enough from any help, any way to be transported by vehicle to school, Kara walks. She walks away from her home, away from the worn, knobby cottonwoods that shed bushels upon bushels of cotton each spring, destined each time to be left to bunch together on the dusty ground, eternally unused. She walks away from the rusted old tractor that once helped to spread fertilizer to grow soybeans, but now sits quietly, defeated, leaning against the barn.

Change would appear, soon enough, though: unbeknownst to Kara and the rest of her town, the rural sanctuary Kara called home would soon be catching up with the surrounding towns. Each day, walking up the dusty roads, kicking up reddish dirt, Kara looks to the horizon. She looks at the fields to her left, and the wooded area to her right, and it is in this way that Kara watches

time pass, watches the seasons bleed into each other. She watches the once-barren fields, dusted with snow and plant-choking frost; begin to host life. She watches sprouts fight through the cracked, desolated earth and she watches them grow. She sees them mature into shoots and seedlings, and, once the temperatures rise to their peak, adult corn stalks. Under her watchful eye, they are harvested, and by her weathered hands, the leftovers are shucked. Her mother dumps them into a broiling pot of water to be made into a dinner, and thus, the process begins again. Seed, sprout, seedling, crop, *chop, chop, chop* as they are felled. Spring into summer, autumn into winter, and on and on it goes.

In this repetitive but ever-changing landscape, Kara had one friend that she greets each day, every day, year after year. A great big oak tree, wrinkled with time and rain and tears, has stood sturdily since Kara's walks began. Even as the fields change, even as the sky crackles with thunder, the oak stands tall. Somehow, it has an air of humble confidence, of aloofness, and somehow, of warmth. On her lowest days, Kara will leave the house early, so she can rest for only a moment in the shade, resting her back against the firm curve of the tree. This enables her to look out, over the fields, past the downtown area that seems, somehow, to be expanding, to the horizon. Kara watches the clouds. She does not take her eyes off the sky and she certainly does not notice the multiplying cranes, bulldozers, trucks, and concrete pushing nature out and pulling shoppers in. And it is in this way that Kara became oblivious to the town's changes, and this would make her sudden realization that much more earth-shaking.

As the school year trudges on, Kara does not look towards downtown. She looks over at the fields, smiling slightly at the shoots of corn beginning to poke their way through, at the

sunflowers that reach their necks towards the sky, enjoying the sunshine just as much as Kara does. The academic year comes to a close, and the construction now wraps around Kara's neighborhood. A Starbucks has been added, as has a Scheel's and the skeleton of what will soon become a mall. Kara does not lift her head. She swims in the lake bordering her home, she walks in the woods with her few friends, and she shucks corn for her mother. In her haste to make the most of summer, she neglects her oldest friend. She does not greet the oak. She does not walk the uneven gravel roads. And it is in this way that she sets herself up for what is possibly the greatest heartbreak of her life.

On the first day of school, things do not go well. Kara wakes ten minutes too late, and she does not have time for breakfast. She pulls her long, brown hair hastily into a ponytail, jams her feet in her worn sneakers, and rushes out the front door, down the path that will eventually blend into the all-too-familiar road. Kara walks the first mile or so without issue, but she finds herself coughing, not from the squat, but from the smog that now seems to smother the fresh air. She does not interpret the failing air quality as foreshadowing. She pays it no mind and continues walking. About halfway through her walk, though, Kara's eyes veer to the side of the road, where the oak, her oldest friend, has always stood. She sweeps her eyes from side to side, wondering if she walked past it by mistake. It is only after about half a minute of searching does she tilt her head down and meet the stump.

And it is only after she hears the bulldozer rattling away that realizes what has happened. Kara sinks to her knees, cutting them on the rocks that dot the road. She does not feel the blood now trickling down her calves. She does not cry. She looks only at what was once a formidable feat of

nature for what seems like hours. It is only after tears streak down her face, the salt in the liquid drying out the tanned skin of her face, that she dares to look towards downtown. And when she does, it is as if she is facing the stump all over again. What was once a sprawling hill, covered with daffodils she would twist into crowns is now the flattened parking lot of some restaurant. The new asphalt glimmers in the heat and Kara's tears glimmer on her face. In the distance, she sees an unfamiliar man climb into an expensive car, too nice and clean to drive down the dusty, rural roads. In a town like this, in which Kara has lived all her life, she can call nearly everyone by name, but she has never seen this man before. She spins around, reeling from the change that has seemingly gripped her town.

And it is in this way that Kara realizes that the rug has been ripped out from under her. She no longer recognizes the town she was raised in.