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Adventure in Asheville

Austin and Brooke got married on January 12 in the historic Mansell House on Old Milton Parkway. The weather was beautiful; the sky was clear and it was unseasonably warm for January in Alpharetta. Longtime friends of the groom, Patrick and I had been asked to serve as groomsmen. The ceremony proceeded quickly. In correspondence with Austin’s unconventionality, Starfucker’s “German Love” played during the recessional as the wedding guests filed out of the crowded 600 square foot venue for the reception in the adjoining courtyard. Aside from the trying presence of a film crew (somehow Austin had managed to sign a contract with a Canadian-produced reality television show to film the wedding) it was a pleasant experience. The delightful nature of the espousal was terrifically surreal – twenty years old and already I have friends in wedlock. Following the reception, the newlywed Austin and Brooke Sheridan slipped away for their honeymoon in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Georgia and then escaped to Asheville, North Carolina to begin their life.

When I finally heard from Austin and Brooke again in mid-February I was pleased to discover that they had comfortably settled in to their new apartment – a converted attic in the home owned by Austin’s aunt and uncle. I asked without hesitation if they were willing to have guests during spring break and they enthusiastically approved my proposal. The only condition was that Larissa and I would have to share a twin mattress in the living room – hardly a problem. I contacted Patrick and Larissa about the excursion and we agreed to leave for Asheville on March 15, the first Friday of our break, and return to Atlanta on March 17, the following Sunday.

Had we adhered to our original itinerary, we would have arrived in West Asheville by one o’clock in the afternoon. However, after a late start and two stops in Alpharetta – once at Austin’s parents’ home to gather several items, and once at my parents’ to change the oil in my car – we did not reach our destination until nearly three o’clock. Starved, exhausted, and yet curiously appeased by a scenic drive through the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains, we excitedly took the off-ramp to West Asheville and, after a series of sharp turns, drove up an unpaved driveway and parked in the gravel lot behind 65 Hudson Street.

Austin greeted us with his typical sarcasm. Brooke and Austin’s aunt sat at a small table in the backyard methodically preparing herbs for a garden that was to be planted in the spring. Austin helped collect our things from the trunk and we carried them up a newly constructed flight of stairs to the apartment door. At the top of the stairs was a small deck. An assortment of plants – a barrel cactus in a glossy orange pot, an Echeveria Doris Taylor neatly rooted in a mason jar, and a small glass terrarium containing sheet moss – were set out on the railing to absorb the precious sunlight.

We entered the apartment and piled our bags and blankets against the wall. Brooke came upstairs, and she and Austin gave us a surprisingly detailed tour of their cozy one bedroom apartment. The floor lacked carpet and consisted of exposed sheets of paint-stained plywood. Upon entering the foyer there was immediately to the left an area to place shoes and hang coats; a small stack of board games was visible under several hanging garments. Descending two stairs, the foyer led to the living room and kitchen area.

A single wooden door on the right opened to reveal a bathroom with a brand new toilet and sink. Above the sink they had fastened an adjustable stainless steel vanity mirror, which Austin explained was the replacement for a larger, less convenient bathroom mirror. To the right of the sink was a solid surface shower enclosure. In the shower Austin identified the shampoo, two types of Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soap – blue for men and pink for women – and three razors which he instructed us not to use since we did not know which one corresponded to which part of the body.

The majority of the apartment was comprised of the living room and kitchen. The ceiling slope reflected that of the roof and the varying slopes of the ceiling made it evident that cosmetic work had been done to the attic to make it livable, or rather spacious enough to stand. The living room walls were smartly decorated with a number of Brooke’s drawings and paintings as well as a large topographic map of the United States. On an old dirty rug were a modern Swedish armchair and a frosted glass side table. A desk was positioned against three small windows; looking through them I could see several houses and in the distance the hazy silhouette of the Blue Ridge Mountains. A collection of Austin’s books, a typewriter, and two MacBooks were neatly arranged on the surface of the desk. The kitchen was quaint. A wooden kitchen cart next to the sink allowed for more counter space and additional storage. On top of the refrigerator was a gallon-sized glass jar filled with red liquid with a thick film floating at the top.

I asked about the contents of the jar. Brooke explained that she was brewing kombucha, a fermented tea drink. She poured several cups of the tea for us to taste and I was greatly surprised with the fizzy beverage. While Brooke described the health benefits and brewing process of the drink, I made a mental note to make my own kombucha when I got home. Austin asked us if we were hungry. We hadn’t eaten since the morning so Austin served us some leftover baked macaroni and cheese.

As we sat and ate, my eyes scanned the living room, and my mind was quickly filled with pleasant thoughts. The Sheridan’s apartment – and their lives, for that matter – seemed very well put together. The apartment was spotless and everything was arranged neatly. Additionally, the marriage was noticeably working well. The two of them seemed so grown up compared to my peers in Atlanta. I was happy for Austin and Brooke, but at the same time, I envied their lifestyle. I couldn’t wait to have my own place, perhaps even with Larissa. My projections of the future continued to become increasingly elaborate, and made my current living situation look unbearable; a messy, two-bedroom apartment shared by four male roommates seemed less than desirable. However, I concluded that moving in somewhere with Larissa was not so far off – two years, at most.

The macaroni disappeared quickly from our bowls, and after a quick walkthrough of the bedroom, we piled into Austin’s car for a tour of Asheville. In West Asheville, we drove past Sunny Point Café on the corner of State Street and Haywood Road and then crossed French Broad River into the River Arts District where Austin and Brooke highlighted some of their favorite spots including The Flood Gallery Fine Art Center, a repurposed mechanic studio that houses a pottery studio and a large library. We made a loop around the River Arts District, and then made our way to downtown Asheville. After a quick drive through the heart of downtown we parked on Lexington Avenue to visit the recently opened menswear store, Old North Supply House. The store stocked brands such as Bridge & Burn, life/after/denim, Topo Designs, Gant, and Tanner Goods as well as a collection of reference materials from Monocle, Hypebeast, and Free & Easy. The collections of shops and restaurants downtown were impressive. It reminded me of Little Five Points but far less touristy.

We left downtown and went back to the Sheridan’s apartment for dinner. Brooke cooked an incredible meal consisting of pennoni pasta, organic farm raised chicken, and peas served in a spicy pink sauce. Austin explained that the sauce recipe – red pasta sauce, heavy whipping cream, garlic, and red pepper flakes – had been given to him by a former percussion instructor. The dish was satisfying, made especially so due to the lack of meat in my diet. Because I strongly disagree with factory farming, I have eaten a primarily pescetarian diet since the summer, so I was excited for the opportunity to eat farm raised chicken. When we finished dinner, Patrick suggested that we return downtown to have dessert at French Broad Chocolate Lounge, an extremely popular attraction in Asheville.

Once more we drove downtown and parked across the street from the chocolate lounge. The wait was nearly forty-five minutes so rather than standing in line we walked several blocks to Pritchard Park where a weekly drum circle is conducted. An unusual mixture of individuals had assembled with their own drums – mostly bongos but also a bass drum and a pair of toms. I had the feeling that nobody there was sober. A girl in the circle sat hugging her knees to her chest and giggled uncontrollably. People danced in the middle of the circle. One of the boys dancing wore a multi-colored, short-sleeved sweater. Before he left, he put another long-sleeved sweater over the one he was wearing, but while pulling it over his head paused for a full ten seconds to stare at the inside. He skipped away. Perhaps I am jumping to conclusions, but I think he was on acid. Everybody else appeared to be in a trance, absorbed in the drum circle’s rhythm. We removed ourselves from the peculiar ambiance of the drum circle and walked back to French Broad Chocolate Lounge.

At the chocolate lounge I purchased a Mast Brothers sea salt chocolate bar to take home in addition to a coconut macadamia brownie and an iced latte for Larissa and I to share. While our stay was short, the soft lighting and live jazz music made for an enjoyable experience. Again, we packed into Austin’s car and drove back to West Asheville. When we got back to the apartment we watched *Moon*, and despite having eaten desert a mere twenty minutes earlier, we each had a bowl of organic mint chocolate chip ice cream, which has become a staple in Austin’s diet. After the movie we retired to our beds and fell asleep; the warmth and quiet of the apartment were refreshing deviations from what I’d grown accustomed to in Atlanta.

From only one day in Asheville I already had a great deal to reflect upon. Larissa and I stayed awake for a short while after everyone else had gone to sleep and we talked about the idea of one day moving in together. We looked at houses and furniture on my computer and were swept away into a fictitious world until we grew too tired to continue. Lying awake I thought about Asheville’s impressive organic culture (I could grow vegetables, I told myself) and the heavy presence of a flourishing local art scene (I could make pottery too, I told myself) and how, even hours from the coast, Asheville reminded me of a small beach town. As I drifted off to sleep my mind transported me into the future and I was met with visions of my ideal life, far removed from the concrete and noise of Atlanta. I woke up the next morning to the smell of fresh brewed coffee, and, to my pleasure, I realized that I was staying two more days in Asheville.