

Pat Conroy, from *My Losing Season*

Pat Conroy was the eldest of seven children in a military family and the victim of his father's violence and abuse from a young age. He used his experiences as a young man growing up, moving constantly and navigating the rigid rules of the military as well as the segregated South under Jim Crow in such novels as The Water is Wide, The Great Santini, and The Lords of Discipline, a fictional account of his years at The Citadel Military College in South Carolina. The Prince of Tides remains Conroy's most celebrated work, and each of these novels has been made into a successful motion picture.

In his 2002 memoir My Losing Season, Conroy recounts his experiences as a student and a basketball player on a mediocre college team during the turbulent 1960s. In this passage, Conroy describes his August 1963 journey from Omaha, Nebraska, where his father had just been transferred, back to South Carolina where he had graduated high school in June and where he would begin his "plebe"—or freshman—year at The Citadel.

CHAPTER 7: PLEBE YEAR

I entered The Citadel as a walk-on, a player who makes the team without the benefit of scholarship. My first year, Mel [Thompson, coach of The Citadel] hadn't offered me a scholarship because, as he told my father, "I signed two guards a lot better than Pat," and he was telling the truth. "Walk-on"—this still remains the proudest word I can apply to myself. Walk-on—there are resolve and backbone in that noun.

My parents never considered the possibility of accompanying me to my first day at The Citadel. Instead, they found the cheapest mode of transportation to get me from Omaha to Charleston during plebe week in August. My mother, a bargain shopper of heroic proportions, found a southern version of the slow boat to China and, weeping hard, put me on a train in Omaha that made its ponderous way through the American Midwest, stopping everywhere to take on freight and passengers. For two and a half days I slept sitting up, eating a box of saltines and the banana sandwiches my mother had packed for the trip.

That journey through the heartland was my first great adventure. Aloneness itself seemed like a prize possession to the oldest of seven children, and I drew in the rolling beauty of the American landscape as it sped past the train window. I spoon-fed myself with lush, fabulous images of my country spinning by me in ever-changing light and shadow. On my own for the first time in my life, the exhilaration I felt lent an air of bright enchantment to the passenger compartment. I was on my way to play college basketball, and I didn't think that life could get any better.

But it did. Somewhere in Ohio a young black woman came into my car and sat in a seat across from me. Like me, she was going to college in the South, so we began to talk with an ease I didn't often achieve with other young women. Her personality enchanted me, her outspokenness charmed me and caught me by surprise as we talked about politics and books and the state of the world. Whenever the train stopped she and I would go out to the platform and listen on her radio to reports of the March on Washington that was taking place at the same moment we were moving toward Cincinnati. I had long grown accustomed to being silent around girls, but I marveled as this uncommonly pretty girl dragged things out of me that I did not even know were there. Right away, she told me since she'd never met a southern white boy, there were a lot of questions she had for me. She shared the fried chicken her grandmother had made and I tried to foist one of my mother's banana sandwiches off on her. Together, we listened to the great Martin Luther King speech and fell silent afterwards. I told her I'd met Dr. King

at Penn Center in Beaufort, South Carolina, when my English teacher took me to a community sing at Penn Center on St. Helena Island. My brother Jim would later say that we were lucky to be raised in the South by two people who didn't have a racist bone in their bodies. That day, I tried to tell this loveliest of women the same thing, but youth had engineered barriers that cut me off from thoughts that surged around me in that inland sea where hormones raged. My words kept tripping over her loveliness.

We stayed together on a six-hour layover in Cincinnati; I've always loved the city of Cincinnati because she was at my side as we wandered through the rough-and-tumble district around the central city train station. On the same night that we heard Martin Luther King talk about the sons and daughters of slaves holding hands with the sons and daughters of slave owners, this kind and brilliant and gorgeous woman took my hand in the darkness. I fell asleep wondering how you tell a girl like this you were in love with her.

When I woke the next morning, she had departed my life forever. In the middle of the night, when we crossed some invisible borderline of the harsh and ruthless South where I was raised, the conductor had led her away. The train had entered that zone where the racial codes were honored to the letter of the law. She was moved by the loutish white conductor to the string of "colored" cars at the rear of the train. He confronted me with the old nastiness and told me he knew what I was after. I tried to find her, but my way was blocked by another conductor who had all the panache of a moonlighting Klansman. He informed me that I'd be arrested at the next town and put off the train if I "set one foot in the colored section." My shyness had prevented me from asking her name. Maddened, I patrolled the platforms whenever we reached a city in Virginia or the Carolinas, walking obsessively past the cars carrying hundreds of black passengers, praying to spot her pretty face looking out the window, trying to find me.

Now, as I remember her, she must've been shaken by her first encounter with that evil and embittering South that I'd first tasted in my mother's milk. I hope my South did not harm her after that. With her vitality, ebullience, and a delight in her own prettiness, she could pollinate a room with an infectious sense of joy. She'd accomplished something no girl had done to that point; she had made me feel handsome, prized, fascinating. I lost her to Jim Crow, the bastard who had made my childhood South part inferno, part embarrassment, and all shame. She was the third girl who had ever held my hand. ❖